

SEAN

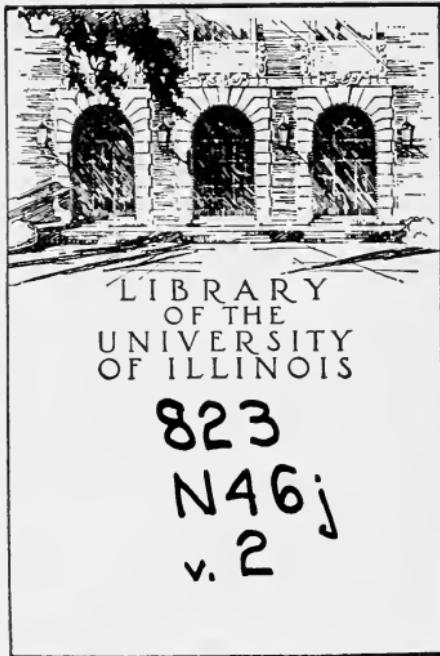
BY

MRS. NEWMAN.



AUTHOR OF

TOO LATE



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J E A N

VOL. II.



JEAN

BY MRS. NEWMAN

AUTHOR OF

'TOO LATE'

'FOR LOVE IN SEQUEL WORKS WITH FATE'

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. II.

LONDON

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JEAN.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AT THE BRICES'.

JEAN made the most of the few hours' freedom she had gained. Selecting the most useful portion of her wardrobe, and such of her school-books as she was most likely to require, she packed them into the small trunk which had been her mother's. Then, putting on a dark hat and cloak, she watched her opportunity, locked her door on the outside, ran lightly down the back stairs, and slipped out into the night. She walked slowly in the direction of Raystone High Street, behind her veil anxiously scanning the faces she met. In a few minutes she came upon what she was looking for: a boy, whom she recognised as occasionally employed to run errands for the house, came whistling towards her. Telling him that he was

required to go an errand, and was to wait near the servants' entrance until she returned to him, she hurried back to the house again, contrived to bring down her trunk unobserved, and bade him take it to the railway station, and leave it at the luggage-office to be called for. Taking her to be one of the servants, and the errand an ordinary one (he had carried many a package to and from Fernside in the same way), the boy shouldered the trunk and set off for the railway station, too much interested in the mental disposal of his shilling to give a thought to anything besides.

At half-past five o'clock the next morning, Jean crept downstairs, softly unbolted the doors, let herself out of the quiet house, and walked quickly towards the railway station, carrying a hand-bag, in which she had packed a few remaining necessaries. Unnoticed by the people standing about in groups, mostly consisting of farmers going to attend the neighbouring markets, she procured a ticket for the London terminus, claimed her trunk, took her seat in one of the carriages, and presently found herself gliding away from Raystone.

After a first hurried glance at her companions in the carriage, and to her great relief finding them to be strangers to her, she turned her eyes upon the town they were leaving behind. How different this to her arrival at Raystone, when,

joyous and hopeful, she had peered eagerly out at the place that was to be her home! How much she had experienced since then of both pain and pleasure. What a lifetime she seemed to have lived during her eight months' sojourn there, and yet she knew that had she the power to blot them out of her remembrance she would not have done it. Though there had been sorrow, there had been so much happiness—enough to leaven a whole lifetime of pain. He had loved her, and, though her love for him had now to be like that of one for the dead, she had greater consolations than has many a poor bereaved one. There was nothing in her dead past over which she was obliged to throw a veil. Looking back, with a prayer for his happiness, she made a solemn compact with herself that henceforth he must always be married to Maude in her thoughts—she must always think of him as Maude's husband.

In her utter inexperience, she had no fears about the future so far as earning her bread went, and no perception of any greater evil than her own to fight against. In happy ignorance of the world she challenged, she was even a little eager to try her strength in grappling with some difficulty. She was willing to work, and it did not for a moment occur to her that there might be some difficulty in finding work to do. Therefore, she

experienced none of the heart-sinkings of many who, although as ready as herself to earn their bread, have found what the greatest difficulty is.

She had arranged her plan for getting away from Fernside easily enough. A few days previously, she had written to a poor woman at whose shop, situated in a small by-street near to Ivy Lodge, Miss Bowles's pupils occasionally bought sweets, asking if she could let her have a room for a short time, and had received a reply sufficiently affirmative to satisfy herself. Jean knew nothing of Mrs. Brice beyond the fact that she had a kind face. Indeed, she was setting forth to battle with the world armed with about as much knowledge of it as was the famous Don himself.

Her fellow-travellers recognised that she was not one of themselves, and left her undisturbed. What would their astonishment have been could they have known that the young, shy-looking girl, sitting passively there, her brown eyes dwelling gravely and calmly upon the scenes they sped by, was entering upon the field of life friendless and alone, to begin a struggle for her daily bread.

On arriving at the terminus, more conscious of her loneliness than she had yet been, Jean shrank back into the friendly shelter of her corner with some indefinite idea of hiding herself; but at the remainder of one of the passengers, 'Here we are,

miss,' she stepped out of the carriage and stood upon the platform, too bewildered by the novelty of her position and the noise and bustle around her to think of her trunk. The sight of other people's luggage being rapidly loaded on to cabs presently reminded her, and she summoned up courage to apply to a porter, shyly asking him if he would be kind enough to find her trunk and get a cab for her.

‘Come this way and point it out, miss,’ he replied, very civilly, after a moment's glance at her flushed face. ‘This it? All right, miss.’ He procured a cab, very carefully hoisted her small trunk on to the top, and gave directions to the driver.

‘What a kind man!’ thought Jean. Then, taking out her purse as the porter was engaged in what appeared to be the somewhat difficult process of protecting her dress whilst closing the door, she asked :

‘Is there anything to pay?’

For answer, the door was unceremoniously banged to, and the man walked off, with a mental expletive not very complimentary to Jean. ‘Trying to catch a fellow in that way, with one of the directors standing close by! Well, I think I shall know your innercent face again!’

How long seemed the drive through the city to Jean! The cabman apparently did his best.

He had enquired whether she wished to be driven fast, and appeared to make frantic efforts at progress. She did not notice that the greatest demonstrations took place when there was a block in the traffic, and that all his exertions were thrown away. But, in course of time, they proceeded westward, and at length arrived at her journey's end—a small crowded street on the Chelsea side of Fulham. Jean was not a little astonished at the man's charge—as much as her journey by rail.

‘Ten shillings! Are you *quite* sure it's so much? Haven't you made a mistake?’ she asked, hesitatingly.

‘She's sharper than she looks,’ was his mental comment. But he volubly appealed to a group of children hastily gathering about them, whether it was fair to be down upon a man like that after telling him to drive fast? ‘Did she think he was going to endanger his horse's life for nothing? There was the pore beast fit for nere another job that day all along of his trying to please her, and now she was a-trying to do a pore——’

‘I did not think of the horse,’ said Jean, quite shocked. ‘And you ought not to have injured it to please me,’ she added, counting the money into his hand.

‘All right, miss; I'll take perticeler keer on

him for the rest of the day,' returned the man, with a serious face ; adding, as he shouldered her trunk and carried it into the shop, a mental wish that another such a job might come in his way that instant minute, though two such could hardly be expected in one day.

A thin, careworn-looking woman, with an infant in her arms, was standing behind the counter serving a small customer, half-a-dozen other children crowding in to watch the process. She curtseyed timidly to Jean, and called to some unseen Johnny to come and carry in the young lady's luggage.

'If you'll please to walk into the parlour, miss ; I shall be done in a minute. Johnny !'

A preternaturally sharp-looking boy, about twelve or thirteen years of age, emerged from a back room ; and, as he came slowly forward with his hands in his pockets, Jean could not help noticing that his eyes fastened hungrily upon her purse.

'If you'll please follow Johnny into the parlour, miss, I'll be there directly, and show you the room as we lets ; though it's very different to what you've been used to, you'll find it's sweet and clean.'

Thanking her, and striving not to feel how forlorn and poor and small everything seemed, Jean followed the boy through an opening in the

counter to a back room. A dark man, of not very pleasing aspect, his eyes being too close together, his forehead too narrow, and his upper lip much too long, sat in his shirt-sleeves eating his dinner, and Jean noticed that all the meat to be seen was upon his plate.

‘Do, miss?’ speaking with his mouth full, and giving her a slight nod over his shoulder.

‘You are Mr. Brice?’ said Jean, involuntarily shrinking back a little.

‘Yes, miss, he’s my husband,’ said Mrs. Brice, entering at the moment.

‘This is the young lady, Thomas.’ At a loss what to say or do next, she added shyly, ‘Won’t you take a seat, miss?’

‘We don’t charge no more for sitting,’ said Mr. Brice, which was intended for an agreeable jest, and received as such, with a nervous little laugh, by his wife. Thomas was in a good humour!

‘I am sorry to intrude. Could not I go to the room I am to occupy?’ said Jean, feeling terribly *de trop*, notwithstanding her hosts’ courtesy.

‘Oh, no, miss, you couldn’t sit there; it’s such a bit of a room, and there’s no fireplace. I told you it was small in my letter. We are only working people, and the young men lodgers as lived with us always took their meals down here.

I thought, when you wrote, that our place wasn't fit for such as you, miss, but you know you said—'

'Do not say another word about it,' cheerfully put in Jean. 'It is quite good enough for as long as I shall require it—only a few days, perhaps.'

'You'll excuse me, miss,' said Mr. Brice, 'but if we let our room it must be taken from week to week, and money down beforehand. Nobody that wants to be fair can object to that.'

'I do not object. What do you charge, Mrs. Brice?'

'Well, miss, we've mostly had three—'

'Six shillings a week is our charge,' interrupted Mr. Brice, eyeing Jean's purse.

Quite relieved at the smallness of the sum—she had been in the wildest uncertainty as to what lodgings ought to cost, and, if Mr. Brice had only known it, would have been just as ready to pay ten as six—Jean laid down six shillings.

Mr. Brice gathered up the money, put on his coat, and lounged out through the shop.

'And if you wants any errands done, our Johnny will do 'em, and welcome, Miss,' said grateful Mrs. Brice, eager to add something on her side of the bargain. Six shillings a week was such a sum to pay! 'Perhaps you would like a bit of something to eat now?'

In truth, Jean was beginning to feel terribly hungry, and acknowledged that she would be glad of something.

‘A chop and a few potatoes, now?’ said Mrs. Brice, whose worn face had brightened up wonderfully after her lord’s departure, its very kindness appearing to have been timid of showing itself in his presence. ‘Johnny, come down, my lad;’ she called out, going to the foot of the stairs.

After a minute or two, the boy came slowly down, and stood near the door with his hands in his pockets, staring at Jean.

‘Will you tell him what to get, please?’ said Jean, putting some money into the other’s hand.

‘Go to the butcher’s and ask Mr. Wild for a nice sixpenny chop, and then to the greengrocer’s for a pound of potatoes, and on your way back call at the baker’s for a penny loaf, and—’

‘I carried her box upstairs,’ said Johnny in a not too subdued voice for Jean’s ears, eyeing her with an injured air.

‘Oh, Johnny!’ ejaculated Mrs. Brice; quite distressed.

But Johnny planted his back against the wall with a determined air.

Mrs. Brice went out into the shop, and beckoned pleadingly to him. But it required a great

deal of beckoning, and only when Mrs. Brice held something up in her hand did Johnny move towards her. Jean could partly hear a discussion which seemed to be all persuasion on one side, and objection on the other.

‘She give me nothing for carrying up her box.’

‘Come, Johnny, some of these bull’s-eyes, now, your favourites.’

‘I ain’t going to take three, when there’s four a penny.’

Before the desired number could be made up, it dawned upon Jean what was expected of her, and advancing into the shop she put sixpence down upon the counter before the boy.

‘Is it for carrying up the box, miss?’ he said, eyeing her sharply as he took up the money, and mentally speculated upon the possibility of opening a fresh account for the errands.

Jean nodded and returned into the little parlour. Mrs. Brice slipped the bull’s-eyes into the basket, with an entreating look at her son, who set off on his errand with a triumphant whistle. His mother went in to prepare for her new lodger’s meal. Placing the babe she carried into a washing-basket, which served for a cradle in one corner of the room, and putting into its hands a lump of spotted china, which did alternate duty as a chimney ornament and plaything, and was supposed to

bear some resemblance to a dog, she set cheerfully to work.

‘But I hope I am not preventing your taking your own dinner, Mrs. Brice?’ said Jean, as the other removed the empty plates, &c., and proceeded to spread a clean cloth upon half the table for her lodger.

‘Oh, no, don’t never think about that, miss. I takes a bit now and then, when I want it, without regular sitting down. What with the children, and the shop, and Thomas a liking things tidy, there’s no time.’

‘Your husband is gone to work, I suppose? What kind of work does he do?’

‘Well, he’s a carpenter by trade, miss, worse luck.’

‘Why, is work scarce then?’

‘No, ’taint that, Miss. Tom can’t settle down to the carpentering. He feels as he ought to be in a different spear.’

‘Oh,’ dubiously replied Jean, ‘is he clever in some other way, then?’

‘Wonderful! If such as him got into Parliament there wouldn’t be any more poor people. It’s grand to hear him talk about independence and all that! Such a head for figures too! The men as belongs to the society a working for freedom, says none of them can talk like Tom. He

makes it out all so clear that the rich people have no right to what they've got, and ought to be made share it with the poor. I do wish some of them as have got more than they can spend, could hear my Tom.'

'Shop!' bawled out four or five small shrill voices, to the accompaniment of sharp raps upon the counter. After three or four minutes, spent in lifting down first one bottle of sweets, and then another, for the approval of her small customers, Mrs. Brice returned to her tidying again.

'Have you much business, Mrs. Brice?'

'Well, no, miss; very little to count on. You see it's mostly farthings'-worths, and they takes such a time making up their minds. That's the pleasure of it, poor little dears, and I haven't the heart to hurry 'em.'

'You must work very hard.'

'I've got my hands full, for sure, miss: and on the heavy wash-days it do come rather hard. But I brings my tub into that corner and gets along somehow. Ah, here's Johnny; there's a good lad, give miss the change.'

He gave the basket to his mother, and then placed fivepence on the table before Jean, waited a few moments, rearranged them more symmetrically, which necessitated the leaving one by itself and stood looking at it. But Jean gathered

the whole five up, and put them into her pocket, at which he turned on his heel and went whistling out again.

In a very short time Mrs. Brice had a comfortable meal prepared for Jean, who sat down quite hungry enough to appreciate it. Just as she commenced two little girls, between seven and eight years old, rushed in from the National School, clamouring for dinner.

‘Hush, Sissy ! Susy, you know manners, I’m sure. This is the lady I told you about, and I know you’ll be good and quiet, won’t you, dears ?’

Sissy and Susy sat down, pressing together like two birds on the small stool indicated by their mother, so promptly, obediently, as to give promise of the best of good behaviour, and remained quietly examining the new comer, keeping their eyes fixed upon her as they confided their opinions in whispers to each other. Mrs. Brice gave each a thick slice of bread and dripping, took a piece of bread and cheese herself, then sat down and proceeded to satisfy baby’s hunger, which appeared sharpened by the sight of the others’ banquet. Sissy and Susy measured their slices fairly together, pinched off little pieces all round, and exchanged them to make the division quite exact ; then went comfortably on with their dinner. Mrs. Brice was congratulating herself upon her chil-

dren's good behaviour, whispering mother's talk to the baby at her breast, when suddenly the treacherous calm upon the stool gave way. Sissy's hands were buried in Susy's curly locks, and Susy's hands were busily employed in thumping Sissy, and both were screaming at the top of their voices.

‘Are they hurt?’ ejaculated Jean, unaccustomed to such a Babel. ‘What is the matter with them?’

Disturbed at its meal baby was put screaming into its cradle, and the mother separated the combatants. ‘Oh, Susy, and you the oldest! What is it, Sissy? tell mother.’

Amidst angry ejaculations and sobs and sudden darts at each other, it was explained that they had amicably agreed to decide fairly between them whatever Jean might leave upon her plate. It appeared probable that a small piece of the end of the chop would be left, and sufficient on the bone to admit of picking. But, to their dismay, Jean calmly ate all that could be eaten, leaving nothing but the bare bone to be fought for. But she retrieved her character and made peace by presenting each of the belligerents with a penny, which they set off to spend in the best of humours. Her heart ached for the poor mother, who with a distressed face entreated her to accept repayment

of the twopence. Jean asked to see her room, and Mrs. Brice led the way to a small back room on the second floor. It was small enough, there being only just sufficient space in it for a narrow bedstead, washstand, and one chair, upon which stood her trunk. But everything looked clean ; and, humble as it was, it was a shelter.

Mrs. Brice timidly ventured a question respecting her lodger's intentions for the future. It wasn't to be expected that she would stay there long. Jean explained that circumstances obliged her to earn her bread, and frankly sketched out her plans. 'A lady who visited my aunt procured a governess by going to an agent, whose address I saw advertised, and she said it was the easiest thing in the world to do. I shall only have to go to the agent's office and put my name down in a book, then they will give me the addresses of ladies requiring governesses, and it's only to choose which I will go to.'

'Well, it do seem easy, miss,' said kind Mrs. Brice. 'And the ladies have only got to see you ; I'm sure anybody would take to you at once.'

'I hope they may,' said Jean, a little doubtfully, as she remembered that the verdict of Miss Ormes and two or three others of her aunt's friends had not been very favourable. She looked at her watch. 'Just one o'clock ; I might go to the

agent's to-day. Is Oxford Street far from here, Mrs. Brice ?'

‘ Too far for you to walk, perhaps, miss. But there's the omnibuses pass the bottom of the street every quarter of an hour, and the fare's only three-pence.’

Mrs. Brice descended to obey the summons of a chorus of small voices screaming ‘ Shop ! ’ and Jean proceeded to refresh her toilet.

CHAPTER XXIV.

WITHOUT REFERENCES.

JEAN set forth with little Sissy for her guide to find an omnibus. Her first little difficulty was how to hail ; but after one had passed and her small companion had shown her how to make the necessary demonstration, she succeeded in attracting the conductor of the next. He jumped from his perch and ran to her side, but her polite enquiry whether his omnibus went to Oxford Street, and whether he could take her there, was received very impatiently.

‘ All right, miss ; get in, and look sharp about it, please ! ’ Adding, *sotto voce*, as he banged the door to, ‘ I should have thought you could have seen that much for yourself. It’s writ large enough. It’s your mincing ones as keeps us behind time ! ’

Jean seated herself in a vacant place and sat with downcast eyes and flushed cheeks, not a little nervous at her position. They had rumbled on

some distance when a shabby-looking woman by her side touched her arm.

‘ Didn’t you say you wanted to go to Oxford Street?’

‘ Yes,’ replied Jean.

‘ I don’t know what part of it you want, but we are nearly half through. Shall I stop the conductor for you?’—seeing that Jean looked puzzled what to do.

‘ If you please.’

She watched the unceremonious process of thrusting an umbrella out and poking it into the man’s back, and then, in obedience to his summons, ‘ Now then, miss !’ stumbled out and placed threepence in his hand. She stood a few minutes on the kerb, bewildered and half frightened at her utter loneliness amidst the Babel of sound. At length, she became aware that she was attracting attention ; the eyes of many of the passers streaming by turned curiously upon her, and she walked on a few steps. Then she remembered that Mrs. Brice had told her to be sure not to ask her way of anyone in the street, and went into a shop. Though the reply to her enquiry was not uncivil, it was very short and abrupt. ‘ Third turning to the right,’ said a man, reaching something from a shelf, and not giving a look towards her.

How much haste everybody seemed to be in,

and how odd it seemed to be walking alone in the midst of such a number of people ! What made them look at her so ? Indeed, she was attracting some little attention by her evident strangeness to her position. Her slow hesitating steps, her wide-opened astonished eyes, her youth and freshness, the delicate refined expression, so different to that of the ordinary street faces, drew attention towards her. She was glad to turn into the comparatively quiet street she was seeking, and then easily found the office. The hall-door stood open, and whilst she stood hesitating what to do she observed the words, ' Miss Gilbert. Enter,' on a swing-door to the right. Gathering up her courage, she pushed the door open and entered a semi-official looking room, part of which was partitioned off to form an inner office. As she stood hesitating what next to do, a pair of keen eyes were regarding her through the glass windows of the partition, and a kindly voice said—

' If you wish to see Miss Gilbert will you come this way ? '

Jean advanced, and found a quiet, business-like, and pleasant-looking gentlewoman seated at a desk.

' I am Miss Gilbert,' she said, with a little bow. Then she left her visitor to explain her business in

her own way, her quiet smile and kindly eyes inviting confidence.

Jean rose to the occasion now, and rapidly informed her hearer that she was seeking a governess's situation where the children were not over twelve years of age.

'Salary no object, trained to teach, hard work not objected to,' repeated after her Miss Gilbert. 'You will not have much difficulty in procuring what you require, Miss Bell,' she added, drawing a large book towards her, and dipping her pen in the ink. 'Acquirements?'

'French and German good; music and drawing tolerable; good conduct—Oh, I was thinking of the marks at school!'

'Salary of no importance,' wrote Miss Gilbert, smiling. 'References?'

'I have no references,' coolly replied Jean.

'No references!' more coolly replied the elder lady, eyeing the girl through her glasses. 'You are not serious, Miss Bell?'

'Does it matter so very much?' asked Jean faintly.

'Do you think that any lady would take a governess into her family without knowing something of her antecedents?'

'I—I thought they might believe me,' faltered Jean. 'I should believe others.'

‘Unfortunately, people are not always to be trusted in their estimation of themselves, Miss Bell,’ a little stiffly replied Miss Gilbert.

‘I should not tell anyone that I am very good. I know that I am not. I have tempers and things, but I never told a lie; and I know what I say I do, and would try to teach it well.’

Woman of business as she was, and quite unaccustomed to trust to appearances, Miss Gilbert was a little at loss now. In all her experience she had never met anyone like Jean. But her experience had been a very hardening one, she had been brought into contact with too many doubtful people to yield to a momentary impulse in favour of a stranger, or lose sight of business. So she replied, in her hardest business tone—

‘I have no objection to put your name on my books, Miss Bell, and the preliminary fee is five shillings. But’—as Jean proceeded to take that sum from her purse—‘I am bound to tell you that I fear your chance of getting a good engagement is exceedingly small.’

‘I do not expect anything very good,’ said Jean.

Miss Gilbert glanced at the girl’s expensive mourning. ‘Pardon me, Miss Bell. Am I right in the supposition that you find yourself suddenly left unprotected—a parent?’

‘My father, Miss Gilbert.’

‘And you find yourself obliged to go out into the world, not previously expecting you would have to do so?’

‘No, I was educated to be a governess from the beginning, only papa altered his mind and intended to leave me his money.’

‘And altered it again?’

‘The property is my aunt’s now. I have nothing.’

‘It seems very unjust to leave it away from his own child.’

Jean reflected a moment. Here was an opportunity for trying what effect the knowledge of her birth would have upon a stranger.

‘He was not married to my mother,’ she said, curiously noting the effect of her words upon the other.

‘Oh!’ gravely ejaculated Miss Gilbert.

‘Do you think it makes any real difference in me?’ broke forth Jean. ‘People never know till I tell them.’

‘Then I very decidedly advise you *not* to tell them, Miss Bell;’ which was Jean’s first lesson in expediency, had she been ready to learn.

A carriage stopped at the door, and in a few moments a fashionably-attired, faded-looking woman entered the office. Jean drew back.

‘Good morning, Miss Gilbert. You are surprised to see me so soon again, I dare say. Mademoiselle left me in the most unhandsome way this morning at a moment’s notice because I insisted that it was part of her duty to fill up her spare time in helping nurse with the mending, hair-curling, and so forth!’

‘You are certainly very unfortunate in your selection, Mrs. Chetwynd.’

‘Such a horrid set of people to deal with, you know. I almost think I will try an English one this time. Of the two evils—’ her eyes lighted upon Jean, and she put up her eye-glass for better inspection. After a few minutes’ scrutiny, she dropped it, and turned to Miss Gilbert again. ‘Pray do not send me any pretty people. We make a point of having good-looking menservants, and there might be all sorts of complications. Plain, middle-aged, without crotchets, and willing to be useful in the nursery. You know what I require, and I shall depend upon you sending me a suitable person. Good morning, Miss Gilbert.’ And, with a parting stare at Jean, Mrs. Chetwynd rustled out of the room.

Miss Gilbert was inscribing her name and requirements upon the books, and Jean was waiting until she had finished to take leave, when some one tapped at the outer door, and pushed it open. A simply-dressed, refined-looking woman of about

thirty-five years of age, whose earnest face wore a troubled expression, entered the office.

‘Good morning, Miss Gilbert. Are you disengaged? I have come to you for assistance again. I am very sorry to say the young lady you sent me cannot make herself at home with us. You know the General and myself are very anxious that our girls should have the advantage of associating with a gentlewoman. But Miss Benson and I have such very opposite ideas as to the meaning of the term. Everyone in the house treats the governess as a gentlewoman, and my girls pay her the same respect which they see their mother does. But really Miss Benson is a little too exacting on the score of birth and former position. She cannot even make allowance for our having only one close carriage.’ With a little smile she went on: ‘You know it was not merely birth or position which was my *sine quâ non*, but the society of a good and well-bred woman for my children, and I really cannot understand any gentlewoman being so sensitive about position as is Miss Benson.’

‘I am sure Miss Benson must be very difficult to please, Lady Dacre.’

‘Well, we really have done our best, from papa to baby, in the way of conciliating; but it has been of no use, and I must confess that it was

not a very severe blow to us when Miss Benson this morning gave notice in consequence of having overheard some allusion which she considered disrespectful to herself from one of the menservants. He would have been dismissed at once had there been any grounds for the complaint. But when the matter was enquired into it turned out that, though he had behaved rudely, she had more than brought it upon herself by her unladylike treatment of him.'

'I hope you will be more successful next time, Lady Dacre.'

'Indeed I trust so. I am so very anxious about my girls.' She caught sight of Jean. 'I beg your pardon, I did not perceive that you were engaged, Miss Gilbert. In half an hour, perhaps. I have to call in Vere Street, and can come again.'

'Oh, no!' began Jean, hastily rising to take her departure.

'This young lady is seeking an engagement,' a little doubtfully began Miss Gilbert.

'Are you?' said Lady Dacre, turning towards Jean with a pleasant smile and bow.

'Miss Bell—Lady Dacre,' said Miss Gilbert, in reluctant reply to the new-comer's enquiring look towards her.

'Will you kindly tell me what kind of an en-

gagement you wish to make, and what subjects you undertake, Miss Bell ?'

Jean ran through her list, her eyes anxiously fastened upon the gentle grey ones turned so kindly upon her.

' And been regularly trained to teach ? That makes it come so much easier to you, does it not ? I shall indeed be fortunate if we can make an arrangement. I am like the children about first impressions. My eldest girl is ten years old, and there are two others, eight and six, but the youngest would only be playing at lessons yet, you know, and I have two good nurses.'

' I like work, Lady Daacre.'

' And play, too, I hope. We shall test your capabilities in that way too, I assure you.' Then more diffidently she went into the business question. ' We usually offer sixty pounds a year, Miss Bell ; but the money question there would be no difficulty about. My husband and I feel that is quite a secondary consideration in comparison with getting the right lady to come to us.'

Jean listened with flushed cheeks and delighted eyes. Here at once was the very thing—a thousand times better than she had dared to hope for !

' Will you name a time, and come and spend a long day with us at Wimbledon, Miss Bell ? I shall be so very glad if you feel that you can

make ours your home, and it is much better for you to see us as we are before deciding, is it not?’

‘I am sure I should be happy to—’ impulsively began Jean.

‘I think it may be as well to inform Lady Dacre that there is a little irregularity in the way of reference,’ put in Miss Gilbert.

‘Irregularity!’ echoed Lady Dacre, looking at Jean.

‘I haven’t any.’

‘No reference! But—you mean that you have not accepted an engagement before?’

‘I have no one to refer you to about me in any way,’ said Jean.

Lady Dacre turned enquiringly towards Miss Gilbert, but that lady was bending over her ledger, and left Jean to speak for herself.

‘Does it make very much difference?’ said Jean, with a sinking heart.

‘I am very very sorry,’ returned Lady Dacre, with a disappointed look; ‘but we ought, I think, to have some kind of reference—unless perhaps you have had some disagreement with your family, and would not mind confiding in me?’

Jean reflected a moment. No, it could not be called a disagreement. There had been no quarrel. So she replied, in Jean fashion, ‘I left my

aunt's house because—something occurred which made them not like me so well afterwards, and—I thought I should prefer working to living upon them.'

'I beg your pardon. I feel so interested in you—*indeed* I am not asking from mere curiosity. Can you tell me, in confidence, what it was that occurred, Miss Bell?'

'There were two things. One was—I would rather not tell that,' said Jean, remembering Miss Gilbert's warning.

'And the other, Miss Bell?'

'I loved—some one—I ought not.'

'Really!' ejaculated Miss Gilbert, quite out of patience.

'A gentleman?' hesitatingly asked Lady Dacre.

'Yes,' replied Jean, in a low voice, a hot blush dyeing her downcast face.

'I am very sorry. You are very open—but—that—does make a difference,' said Lady Dacre, with her eyes full of tears. Though the confession she had extracted seemed so much worse than anything she had expected, she was deeply touched by the girl's frankness, and her tender, womanly heart still yearned towards one so young and beautiful and friendless. She was almost a child, and had not even now lost the

look of purity and innocence. Then, however much she might have erred, she seemed so anxious to begin afresh. Would a happy wife and mother be justified in passing her by without offering a helping hand? Ah, no! not in Ellen Dacre's estimation. Though her girls must be guarded from companionship with one whose antecedents appeared doubtful from a moral point of view, she would not hold herself excused if she did not do anything and everything in her power to help a weaker sister. So she went on gently—

‘I am afraid we cannot come to any arrangement, Miss Bell; but I may be able to be of some service to you as a friend. If you will let me, I will do my best to serve you. Do believe I am sincere, and say you will come and see me, when we could talk over your future plans. Come to this address, and let me be your friend’—offering Jean a card.

But Jean had noted her involuntary look of dismay at the communication that had been made, and although she did not understand its full import, she saw that the impression was very seriously against her, and shrank shyly and a little proudly from the offer. A time might arrive when she would be glad to seize a less advantageous opportunity than this for making a friend; but it had not come yet. Lady Dacre

said a few words to Miss Gilbert respecting the kind of lady she required for her children, then turned and offered her hand to Jean, with a murmured hope that she would do well, and bade her good bye.

‘I am very sorry you were unsuccessful, Miss Bell,’ stiffly said Miss Gilbert. ‘Lady Dacre is such an exceptionally advantageous person to deal with. But if you put matters before people in so very unfavourable a light, I really do not see how you can expect—’ Remembering that after all Jean had a right to expect something for her five shillings, and in truth not for one moment believing, as less experienced Lady Dacre had done, that the girl had really anything to be ashamed of, she added—‘We must hope for the best. People who do not give such high salaries are not so particular, although I advise you not to refer to love matters again.’

‘I will not again, Miss Gilbert.’

‘And come in the morning for the future, Miss Bell; our best time is between eleven and two o’clock.’

Jean took leave, and went out into the street again with a heavy heart. It did not appear so very easy to get a situation, after all. Lady Dacre had confessed that she was prepossessed in her favour, and was manifestly sorry to be

obliged to decline making an engagement with her, and yet how terribly decided she had been ! But Jean's nature was a too elastic one to succumb for any length of time. She was soon comforting herself with the reflection that Miss Gilbert had said people who did not give high salaries were not so particular. She did not want a high salary. She would take a very small one, and put up with anything until she had overcome the difficulty about reference. To think of that difficulty never having occurred to her ! Poor Jean, it was fortunate for her that her difficulties grew gradually upon her ; had she seen them all at once it might have been more than even she could have had the courage to face.

CHAPTER XXV.

UNDERCURRENTS.

IT was quite dusk when Jean at length found her way back to the Brices' humble abode. It looked humble enough, not to say desolate, now ; a tallow candle, burning feebly in the shop window, imparting to it a more dreary aspect than total darkness. The heterogeneous collection of penny toys, sweets, cheap cotton, &c. &c. exposed for sale, was not very attractive in the best light, but it looked miserably poor in this.

‘Please to walk in, miss,’ said Mrs. Brice, when she saw who it was tapping on the counter.

She was sitting, neat and clean, at needlework, mending the day’s dilapidations in a heap of children’s clothes on the table before her. This was her time of rest, she told Jean, as the latter sat wearily down by the fire opposite to her, and loosened her cloak. Sissy and Susy were in bed, and baby was mostly quiet of an evening, and would miss kindly excuse Johnny’s bed? She

need not have let it down so early, to be sure (it represented a chest of drawers by day), for he was gone to the the-a-ter. ‘Johnny mostly did when he got a sixpence,’ sighed the poor mother. After a while she grew conscious that her lodger had returned more depressed than she had set forth, and intruded no more family details.

Jean soon explained the cause of her abstraction. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to tell out her troubles to Mrs. Brice, who had such a large stock of love and sympathy on hand, although—or because—she was always spending it. She soon contrived to give a little *couleur-de-rose* to the picture. ‘Why, lor, it wouldn’t never do to be cast down so soon. Something will be sure to turn up, never fear about that, miss—for a beautiful young lady like you, as knows ‘accomplishments’—accomplishments being a great saving power in Mrs. Brice’s estimation. She did not believe that Jean would have to play at work long. ‘Once among her own class, lovers would be coming about her like flies round sugar, and she’d soon be riding in her own carriage, with nothing to do but be happy, God bless her!’ thought the good woman, who was fast falling in love with Jean herself. Then it occurred to her that there might be another cause besides disappointment to make her lodger look so fagged,

and she suggested supper. Jean was fain to acknowledge that she was beginning to feel very hungry again.

‘But I do not like troubling you so much, Mrs. Brice.’

‘Lor, don’t never think as it’s any trouble, and you so kind, too ! I must be a doing something, you know, miss, and it’s my bounden duty to get you what you want. I can easy run out and get what is wanted now, if you’ll kindly give a eye to the shop for me, and tell anyone as comes in to wait a bit. Though it ain’t likely that anybody will come at this time, unless some little one can’t be got to bed without sugar-plums.’

Jean had finished her penny roll at dinner, and more bread had to be fetched, with a mite of cheese and some butter, and then she insisted upon her kind friend sitting down and sharing the meal with her, with the addition of half a pint of ale. But how fast the money seemed to melt away, she thought, reckoning up the expenses of the day as she sat on the edge of her small bedstead when she had retired for the night, leaving Mrs. Brice sitting up for her husband and son. The cost of each separate thing had seemed so little, and yet the total frightened her. But she recollect ed that the railway journey and cab hire

would not have to be paid on the morrow, and was, besides, too heartily tired to be kept awake by anxiety. She fell asleep with a prayer on her lips, and slept as peacefully as though her future path were strewed with flowers.

She was awakened the next morning by the whisperings of Sissy and Susy outside her room door, and sprang up looking about her with bewildered eyes at her new surroundings. Then she proceeded to dress in her simple dainty fashion ; though she knew of no other aids to the toilet besides soap and water, and brushes, she was more daintily particular in her use of them than is many a modern belle, and if her soft brown hair was too simply arranged for the fashion, it admirably suited her style of face. She entered the little parlour downstairs looking, as Mrs. Brice thought, fresh as a rose. The latter was busily engaged in preparing Sissy and Susy for school, whilst gently striving to impress the advisability of doing something upon her firstborn, Johnny, who sat in the window seat swinging his legs and eyeing the table upon which was placed Jean's modest breakfast.

Of all Mrs. Brice's troubles, Johnny was the greatest. Her persuasive arguments notwithstanding, Johnny very much preferred idleness to work. She had succeeded in getting him several

situations at shops in the neighbourhood ; but he had given them up after a very short trial, and returned upon her hands again. She was now endeavouring to persuade him to make one more attempt, having heard that an errand boy was required at a grocer's in the road ; drawing what she considered to be a very attractive picture of the great things that such a step in life might lead to. He might in time be taken to help behind the counter and learn the trade, and some day have a shop of his own, with a horse and cart and all sorts of grandeur, if he would only begin with a will. 'Think of mother coming and asking for two ounces of tea, "if you please, sir;" only it needn't be "sir," then, need it, Johnny ?'

To all of which he listened with a supercilious smile. For Johnny had seen a much more attractive picture the night before—a much easier and quicker method of getting a fortune than by working for it.

If the hero of the night before had been content to be a grocer's errand boy, he would never have attained the eminence he had. How completely Johnny's sympathy, and indeed the sympathy of the audience generally, had been with the dashing 'Claude,' whose necessities forced him to borrow other people's money. How gracefully he had done it always ; how pictu-

resque was his language and attire, and what courtesy he displayed to the fair sex! How high was his sense of honour, too, and how generous he was to the poor. What a pretty sentiment that was about the necessity for a better distribution of wealth, and the harmlessness of taking from the rich to give to the poor. Then the moral climax: when, having won the affections of the lovely Clarissa, with a hundred thousand pounds and her father's blessing, the gallant hero stepped forward and made an affecting speech about his intention to reform, settle down as a country squire, and lead a virtuous, contented life with his adored Clarissa; having arrived at the conclusion that 'virtue and virtue alone was happiness below.'

All present felt that morality had been upheld, and departed with a glow of sympathy for the hero; every boy wishing himself a Claude, and every girl wishing herself Clarissa.

'I should like mother to have seen that!' thought Johnny, as he trudged homewards, cold, hungry, and discontented. 'It's all very well her a talking about work. Father knows better. What right have them rich folks to be doing nothing but pleasuring from morning till night, while poor people's got to work like slaves for ever such a little?'

‘Go up and see whether father will have another cup of tea, there’s a good lad,’ said his mother, anxious to get him out of the way. She went on to explain that her husband had been out late at some meeting the night before, and was taking his breakfast in bed.

Notwithstanding Mrs. Brice’s unceasing care, her little home looked very forlorn by daylight. Jean noticed the leaf of the table hanging by one hinge ; the paper pasted over the broken windows ; the threadbare scraps of carpet, and general air of poverty, cleanliness alone preserving the place from utter desolation.

‘I thought you said your husband was a carpenter?’ presently said Jean, observing Mrs. Brice’s rather complicated method of propping up one of the chairs with part of a broom handle stuck in a bottle to support her washing tub.

‘Yes ; so he is, miss,’ replied Mrs. Brice.

Jean was prevented further comment by the entrance of Mrs. Brice’s lord and master. He seated himself by the fire with a smile, that was meant to be very pleasant and friendly, as he wished her good morning. ‘Don’t you disturb yourself on account of me, miss, this is always my side.’

But Jean was eager to make her escape. It seemed a thousand times preferable to be in her

tiny close room, than in Mr. Brice's parlour when he was present. She busied herself in making her bed, and putting things neat to spare Mrs. Brice; then dressed and set out for the agent's again. This time she decided to walk and save the omnibus hire. With some difficulty, she felt so shy of asking people to direct her, she found her way to Miss Gilbert's.

Five or six ladies of different ages, though none so young as herself, were waiting in the outer office, and looked a little curiously at her as she entered.

‘Miss Gilbert is engaged with some one just now,’ said a quiet, refined, but depressed-looking middle-aged woman, moving aside to show Jean there was a vacant seat next to her, and going on with a kindly smile to make some reference to the fineness of the morning, as she observed the young girl’s diffidence. ‘I do not think I have met you here before?’

‘No,’ said Jean; ‘I only applied to Miss Gilbert yesterday.’

‘I hope you may be more fortunate than I. I have been here regularly every morning the last six weeks.’

‘Are there so few applications for governesses, then?’ asked Jean, with a sinking heart.

‘No; very many. People complain that they

have just as much difficulty in getting suited with governesses, as we do in finding employment.'

'I do not understand.'

'All governesses are not really efficient, and those that are do not always meet the kind of people who appreciate them. It's the old story of the square pegs and round holes, you know. It is becoming a constant complaint that governesses undertake to teach a great deal more than they have anything like a thorough knowledge of, and it is doubtless true enough; but it is a natural consequence of such a vast range of subjects being insisted upon. To command a good salary in these days, a governess is not only expected to have solid knowledge, which it would have taken all her time to acquire, but she must also be able to finish, as it is called, in all the newest styles of harp and piano playing, singing, drawing, painting, and so forth; to be proficient in any of which she must have had some special talent, as well as long practice. To meet the demand, young ladies are found with a smattering of it all, and the complaint is kept up that there is an increasing difficulty in finding efficient governesses. I had the advantage of a really solid education from my father, who was a good classic and mathematician, and I used to help him with his pupils in rather advanced

work ; but I find myself passed over because I am not artist enough to conscientiously undertake more than drawing lessons, and do not teach singing. I was yesterday offered ten pounds a year, and this in an age when there is such an outcry about the better education of women. Until mothers have the sense and courage to leave out of their daughters' education such accomplishments as they have no talent for, and devote the time at present wasted to whatever special aptitude they may have (the stupidest pupils I have known had *some* kind of speciality) we shall never have well educated women. If the talents girls possess were carefully trained we should have more individuality amongst women ; each would have her strong point and be as little ashamed of acknowledging that she had no speciality for certain others as is a man. A mathematician does not lose standing by not being a classic or *vice versa*. Pardon me, I ought not to trouble you with all this. I am afraid I am getting quite soured and selfish.'

‘Indeed I am not surprised at your feeling the injustice,’ said Jean, adding, with a sigh—
‘But I should be very glad to get an offer of even ten pounds a-year and a home.’

‘I am sorry to hear that—sorry for what it implies, you know. You have evidently so little

experience of life, and are so unfit to battle with the kind of people you are likely to meet. The kind of women who offer a governess ten pounds a year, are not always, as you might suppose, poor gentlewomen.'

An idea suddenly occurred to Jean, and she said with a bright smile, 'I am so glad! You will, I think, have the offer of something better than you expect this morning. It has just occurred to me that the very one to appreciate you was here yesterday; she was so good and kind, and seemed to want just such a gentlewoman as yourself. Her name is Dacre, and she lives at—'

'I am afraid I must not take advantage of your information. You are very kind to think of it, but it is against Miss Gilbert's rules to pass on introductions.'

'But she will tell you herself;' impulsively began Jean. 'You are just exactly what Lady Dacre is seeking for; indeed you are!'

The other smiled, not hopefully, but at the young girl's enthusiasm. 'I sometimes think that people who "exactly" suit each other do not happen to get introduced—it would not increase business. But do not attach any value to my words. I am a disappointed woman, you know, and disappointed people are apt to be cynical in

their judgments. Do not let me destroy your faith. I would give a great deal to be able to believe as much as you do at this moment.'

A young lady emerged from Miss Gilbert's inner room, and stopped a moment before Jean's companion on her way out of the office.

'Our ten pounds a year friend, again!' she laughingly said; 'I could not induce Miss Gilbert to give me her address, because I fancy she guessed what I wanted to do. I really should enjoy giving that woman my opinion of her magnificence.'

'Will you step this way, Miss Bell?' said Miss Gilbert, coming for a moment to the door of the inner room.

Jean bowed to the lady she had been talking to, and obeyed Miss Gilbert's summons.

'You said yesterday that salary was no object with you, Miss Bell?' said Miss Gilbert, smoothing out a be-scented and crested rose-coloured note upon the desk before her. 'If you would accept a small one, I can give you the address of a lady on my books, who might make an engagement with you. As she offers only a small remuneration, she may not be so *exigeante* as many people on the score of reference, you know.'

Jean expressed herself ready to take advantage of the introduction; although a little less

enthusiastically than she would have done an hour previously. Miss Gilbert gave her an address at Brompton, and in reply to her timid enquiry as to the best means of getting there gave her the welcome intelligence that it was close to her own abode.

‘I hope it is something worth your acceptance, and that you will obtain it,’ kindly said the lady she had been talking to, as Jean passed out.

‘You are very kind. I am sure I hope you too will be fortunate,’ returned Jean, gratefully.

CHAPTER XXVI.

NINE POUNDS A YEAR.

ON her way down the street Jean's attention was arrested by a crowd of people. They were gathered about a Punch-and-Judy show. She paused a moment on her way past, and in a very short time was gazing at it with as much enjoyment as the veriest child there. Entirely forgetting where she was, she threw up her veil, and with the soft rosy flush of excitement in her face, laughed merrily out with the crowd.

The performance over she recollected where she was, drew down her veil and hurried on. She made her way through Hyde Park, and on as far as Knightsbridge; then began to make enquiries for 'Elysium Villa.' She happened to ask at a baker's shop where dealt the Mrs. Tweedie she was seeking, and received so plain a direction that she had no difficulty in finding that lady's pretentious abode. 'The house with the vultures at the gates, lions on the door-steps, and statues

in the front garden' was easily perceived at some distance.

'Perhaps Mr. Tweedie sells this kind of thing,' thought Jean, as she entered at the gate, passed by the vultures, &c. and rang the door-bell. 'Yes, Mrs. Tweedie was at home,' said a small boy in page's attire, who opened the door. After admitting her into the hall, he stood hesitating a moment or two eyeing her sharply, and calculating probabilities as to her position in society. It was all very well to tell him that he ought to be able to distinguish between common people and gentle-folk, James did not find it so easy. However, he now came to the conclusion that if his mistress was a lady Jean certainly couldn't be one, and left her standing in the hall, whilst he carried her card into a side room.

Jean heard a deep voice give the order, 'Drawing-room, James.' The boy quickly returned, and with a bow asked her to follow him. Jean looked round the room she was ushered into with astonished eyes. Never had she seen so gorgeous a room as this—its gilding, yellow satin upholstery, great pier-glasses, blue and crimson carpets, and brilliant-hued vases, all so oppressively new and obtrusively expensive. What a contrast this to the Grange and Fernside drawing-rooms!

A lady, whose appearance conveyed somewhat

the same impression as her room ; with a high bald forehead, small sharp black eyes, large Roman nose, and very expansive figure, entered the room, bearing Jean's card in her hand.

'From Miss Gilbert,' she said, reading the line Jean had written to that effect upon her card. 'I hope she has not made a mistake this time. The last young lady she sent was quite unsuitable. You appear very young to take charge of five pupils. Will you let me know what you undertake to teach, Miss Bell ?'

Jean ran through her list of subjects ; Mrs. Tweedie checking each qualification off upon her fat fingers. '*Not* Italian nor singing ?'

'No.'

'That is unfortunate, and French and German *not* acquired abroad, I suppose ?'

'No ; only at school, Mrs. Tweedie.'

'In that case you could not expect—I presume Miss Gilbert informed you that I do not give a large salary, in addition to a comfortable home ?'

'Yes, she told me that ; but as I can offer no reference I should be content to accept small remuneration,' returned Jean, striving to believe in the possibility of finding a comfortable home at Elysium Villa.

'No reference !' ejaculated Mrs. Tweedie, trying to look very shocked. 'That is certainly

a very serious drawback.' In her heart of hearts she was not very seriously affected by the intelligence ; taught by experience that ten pounds a year did not command absolute perfection. She had found the principal defect in the young ladies she had previously engaged to be inability to teach. If Jean was efficient as a teacher, it would only be to look sharply after her between whiles, keeping her to the schoolroom, and leaving the children to watch her. She must be clever indeed to hoodwink Cecilia Ann. 'No,' summed up Mrs. Tweedie rapidly in her mind ; 'she couldn't carry off the tables and chairs, and there'll be nothing else for her to take ; people don't send up silver spoons to governesses. But of course she was not going to let Jean see that her want of reference was of no moment in comparison with her ability to teach. Besides it gave Mrs. Tweedie the opportunity for bargaining, and making bargains was the delight of her soul. Was not everything most precious to her amongst her gorgeous surroundings, a sort of trophy which had been carried off after a sharp skirmish with the brokers at a sale ? So she repeated as solemnly as she could— 'A very serious drawback indeed, and if I entertain the idea of engaging you under such circumstances you could not of course expect more than a nominal salary—say eight pounds a-year or so ?'

‘I—shouldn’t mind about the money,’ said Jean, forlornly.

‘And there must be a regular agreement drawn up between us, you know,’ said Mrs. Tweedie, good humouredly ; indeed, with a contraction of one eyelid which almost approached a wink. ‘Say for three years in the event of your suiting. It would never do to have you staying only long enough to get a character.’

Jean remained silent, and the lady went on—‘I suppose you would have no objection to my eldest son asking you a few questions in French and German, *and* cetera, Miss Bell?’ Adding, with a *dégage* air, ‘I am ashamed to say I have almost forgotten mine.’

‘No ; I should not mind that—only—I would rather decline your offer, Mrs. Tweedie,’ said Jean, feeling immensely relieved when the words were spoken.

‘Decline ! You cannot be serious, Miss Bell ? Without a character !’

She eyed the young girl, who had risen from her seat as she spoke, from head to foot. ‘I wish Cecilia Ann would rise like that,’ she thought, ‘instead of bouncing so.’ Then went on to Jean a little coaxingly—

‘Well ; suppose we say nine pound, *and* your washing ?

‘I was not thinking of the money,’ said Jean.

‘Not the money !’ echoed Mrs. Tweedie, quite fascinated and all the more anxious to complete the bargain, as the other drew back. ‘What is it then ?’

‘I—cannot tell you. Good morning, Mrs. Tweedie ; I am sorry to have troubled you.’

‘But I beg and insist that you will tell me, Miss—Miss what’s-your-name. Do you suppose that I am to be played with ?’ said Mrs. Tweedie, very determinedly standing before Jean.

‘I do not think I should suit you,’ murmured poor Jean, looking round at Mrs. Tweedie’s grandeur.

‘I do not understand you.’

‘Will you allow me to say good morning, Mrs. Tweedie ?’ pleaded Jean.

‘Not until you have told me why you think you should not suit. What can you object to, I should like to know ?’

‘Everything,’ said Jean, losing her patience.

‘Well to be sure ! Everything, indeed ! including myself, I suppose ?’

‘I did not want to say it,’ blundered poor Jean.

Mrs. Tweedie rang the bell violently, and called out, ‘The door, James !’ adding also for the

boy's ears, 'I hope Miss Gilbert will send some one respectable next time!'

'There!' thought James. 'Don't say it's my fault this time. You told me to take her into the drawing-room yourself!'

'She would make me!' thought Jean, turning away from the Vultures with a sigh of relief, and walking slowly homewards. 'I'm sure I did not want to tell her; but it was quite true. Mrs. Brice is a thousand times more like a lady. I would rather live with Mrs. Brice for ever!' But the thought forced itself upon her that living with Mrs. Brice would only be possible so long as her money lasted. Her heart sank, and she began to tell herself that perhaps she ought to have tried to live with Mrs. Tweedie. 'I am afraid I ought to have tried; Miss Gilbert said that I could not expect much of an offer. But it was not the smallness of the salary I minded; and there can't be many people like Mrs. Tweedie—impossible! I never saw anyone like her before. And I will take the very next offer I get, whatever it may happen to be!'

She arrived at her humble home, tired, depressed, and terribly hungry. 'So unfortunate,' she thought, 'my being such a hungry girl when eating costs so much!'

Whilst her kind friend was frying a piece of

steak, which she had run out and fetched herself to spare Jean the paying her boy to do, the girl told about her disappointment.

‘I have been to see one lady (Miss Gilbert called her a lady), but I declined her, and she was so cross about it, Mrs. Brice.’

‘Don’t never be down-hearted about it, Miss. Something better will turn up soon, never fear. It’s something to get a chance of declining you know, ever so much better than getting no offer at all,’ cheerily returned Mrs. Brice. ‘Don’t let it spoil your appetite.’

‘I do believe nothing would spoil that,’ dolefully replied Jean.

Afterwards, having the rest of the day upon her hands—she could not go to Miss Gilbert’s until the next morning—Jean put on a washing dress, and asked Mrs. Brice to let her help with the mending work, or what not. After a little protesting Mrs. Brice yielded, and Jean was soon stitching away at a frock for baby. Moreover she found a fairy story for Sissy and Susy when they roamed restlessly in and out, not knowing how to spend their half-holiday now that a sharp shower prevented their receiving a party on the door-steps. They brought their stool to Jean’s feet, and sat nestling together on it, devouring her with their eyes.

‘Well,’ said Sissy, after deliberating with Susy over the *dénouement*, ‘I wouldn’t have minded being good to get all that; would you, Susy? If a fairy came and asked me to give her a jug of water, I’d fetch it for her for less than that girl did, and run all the way to the pump, too!’

‘Ah, but she thought she wasn’t a-going to get anything for doing it, Sissy. She didn’t know the fairy was going to give her all them beautiful things. She thought she was doing it for nothing, didn’t she, Miss Bell?’

‘Yes, of course it wouldn’t have been kind else, you know, Susy. All the beautiful gifts were for being kind, not for the jug of water.’

‘Nobody does things for nothing!’ very decidedly opined Sissy.

‘I think you know some one who does good because she loves doing it, without thought of reward?’ gently said Jean.

‘No, we don’t!’ promptly and decisively.

‘Think again.’

In a moment or two Susy clapped her hands, and exclaimed with a beaming face: ‘Oh, yes, I do. You means mother, Miss Bell. Mother had little Billy Jones here a whole month when his mother had the fever!’

‘Mother sits up with the people when they are ill,’ exclaimed Sissy.

‘Mother gived her share of Christmas dinner to little Lizzie Day !’

‘Mother never beats us like Jane Mills’ mother beats her, and mother never scolds back at father !’ said Sissy.

‘And,’ finished up Susy, ‘mother’s good when people don’t know, and never gets nothing for it ; so she must like being good, don’t you, mother ?’

‘I wish I had a mother to love,’ said Jean.

Sissy’s and Susy’s eyes were turned upon their mother with a new expression in them. Mrs. Brice’s head was bent low over her washing-tub, into which her tears were falling fast. But they were soon brushed away, and she was busily preparing tea. Susy sat with her elbows in her lap, and her chin in her hands gazing meditatively into the fire, until baby’s cry rang through the room. Then she started up, and went to the cradle.

‘I’ll keep her quiet, mother.’

And Susy stood bravely at her post, rocking the cradle, though Sissy came peeping in at the door, making all sorts of signals to draw her away.

‘I do believe you like doing it for mother ?’ said Jean.

‘Yes,’ replied Susy, turning her eyes away from the temptation at the door to her mother’s face.

That half-hour at tea with Jean—the latter insisted upon their taking it together—was the happiest Mrs. Brice had experienced for many a long day. A little sunshine had begun to find its way into her colourless life. But presently Thomas Brice came in, and notwithstanding his protest, meant to be very polite, against her departure, Jean murmured something about having work to do upstairs, and went to her room.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THOMAS BRICE'S TACTICS.

JEAN found it rather dull sitting on the edge of her tiny bed mending her gloves (the rest of her small wardrobe was as yet too new to require repair) by the light of a small tallow candle. Then, with such little occupation for her thoughts she found it so difficult to prevent them straying to Maude's husband. 'Maude's husband,' she repeated again and again with her lips, whilst her rebellious heart would only whisper another name. But she tried hard to force her thoughts into another channel, to think upon her interview with Mrs. Tweedie. Had she been right in acting according to her impressions against that lady? Was it right to refuse nine pounds a year, with food and shelter from *anyone* in her present circumstances?

Then she counted her small store of money, and made a list of her expenses, which did not raise her spirits. Fifteen pounds had seemed such

a fortune to begin the world with; but how rapidly it was diminishing—how quickly a sovereign melted away.

She laid down to rest more weary and depressed than she had hitherto felt. But she slept the healthy dreamless sleep of a child, and arose to begin the next day with recovered spirits.

Miss Gilbert was rather stiff and distant in her bearing, when she found time to accord a few words to Jean, after the latter had waited in the office nearly three hours.

‘Nothing that is likely to suit you in this morning’s correspondence, Miss Bell.’ After a moment or two employed in turning over some letters she added, ‘I was a great deal surprised as well as disappointed to receive Mrs. Tweedie’s account of your interview with her, Miss Bell. I thought you were desirous to make an engagement, and, under the circumstances, willing to put up with a few disadvantages in the outset. In any case, I did not expect to hear that you were capable of trying to give offence. I expect the young ladies I introduce to behave with courtesy.’

‘I did not want to be discourteous, Miss Gilbert,’ murmured Jean; ‘but Mrs. Tweedie was so big, and would not let me go away until I had told her why, and when she asked if it was herself as well as all the rest that I objected to, I

could not have said No, for that would not have been true. She was so dreadful, Miss Gilbert. I never saw any lady like Mrs. Tweedie.'

'When you have gained some experience you will be wiser, I hope, Miss Bell ; but I am afraid you will have to pay rather dearly for enlightenment. People who have their way to make in the world, cannot always associate with only the most refined, and certainly cannot afford to give offence by allowing their exact opinions of others to be too apparent. Indeed, I do not consider it a proof of the best breeding to be too'—Miss Gilbert hesitated ; but could not at the moment find another word than 'candid' to express her meaning.

Jean bent her head to the rebuke, and wished Miss Gilbert good morning, turning away with a heavy heart. But Miss Gilbert held out her hand, and added kindly, for indeed her heart went out to Jean in a way that she could not herself understand, so very unbusinesslike was it.

'My dear, I have only been speaking for your good, and you must not fancy me quite so cross an old woman as I may appear to be. But the truth is, the world is not good enough to seem exactly what it is, and whilst that is the case, it is better for one's own peace not to attempt to lift the veil which it draws over its imperfections.'

A little mystified, but grateful for the elder lady's evident kind intent, Jean murmured an apology, and promised to try to amend her manners.

Miss Gilbert sighed as she bent over her desk again, 'Ah, the pity of it, that the child's eyes should ever be opened !'

'It is my manner that is offensive !' thought Jean, as she walked homewards. 'It must be my unfortunate manner ; for I'm sure I did not want to wound Mrs. Tweedie's feelings, though I did not like her. I wonder if I were to write a note asking her to pardon it.'

It was not very exhilarating to return to the Brice circle for the rest of the day, notwithstanding her liking for her landlady. But her walk to and from the agent's was a too long one for her to feel inclined for more exercise. So she made the best of it ; indeed not a little astonishing Mrs. Brice at her capacity in that way. The only lady who entered her little shop parlour was an unfavourable specimen of her class, who always declined a seat, and stood with her rich dress gathered about her, whilst putting Mrs. Brice through her weekly examination respecting the tracts left for her perusal. But here was Jean sitting down amongst them, making herself quite at home, and brightening the little room with her presence. It was only when

Thomas Brice came in that she began to feel ill at ease and anxious to make her escape.

It was Johnny's opinion, which he tried to impress upon Sissy and Susy, that the new lodger was but a pretended sort of lady, after all; else she'd never take up so with mother. Why, she'd do anything for mother—nurse the baby or anything! Mrs. Wild, the butcher's wife, was ever so much grander and like a lady than Miss Bell. Catch *her* speaking to mother as Miss Bell did. Sissy and Susy were slightly uncertain in their opinion. They would have preferred Jean being more of a lady than Mrs. Wild, because they liked her better; but they could not deny that the butcher's wife was grander. Mrs. Brice herself saw, and saw clearer than anyone with whom Jean came in contact, and was cheered and refreshed by the knowledge, though it somewhat contravened her husband's notions about superiority.

It happened that Jean was washing the cups and saucers that had been used at tea, when Thomas Brice returned that evening.

‘You're doing that don't look right, miss!’ he said, with what was meant for politeness.

Jean laughed. ‘Do I seem awkward, Mr. Brice?’

‘Taint work for such as you, miss.’

‘I am afraid you have a very poor opinion of

my capacity, Mr. Brice,' she returned, polishing away. Then neatly arranging them in the little cupboard by the fireplace, she added, 'There, I'm sure they look clean and tidy, do they not, Mrs. Brice ?'

' You like to do it, I know, miss, and I'm sure you're wonderful handy ; but it is not fit work for you, and—' She was stopped with a kiss on her cheek, as Jean passed out of the room. Someway she could not get over her disinclination to remain in Mr. Brice's society. The solitude of her tiny room was infinitely preferable, although she was obliged to sit wrapped up in a shawl. But there was to be no more thinking of Maude's husband ; that was not safe thinking yet. So she got out her books, and set to work trying to put Schiller into readable English. An hour later came a low tap at the door, and Mrs. Brice looked in.

' There's a nice fire downstairs, Miss Bell, and the children's very quiet.' Then a little more pleadingly, seeing the other's disinclination. ' If you wouldn't mind coming down, please. Thomas he fancies it's because of him, though I tell him you've got things to do upstairs most like.'

Jean looked at the other's pale face, and red-rimmed eyes turned entreatingly upon her, and guessed something of the truth. The whole truth,

that Thomas Brice was beginning to abuse his wife about Jean always leaving the room when he entered it, she did not suspect.

'I will come down, Mrs. Brice,' she said kindly.

'Perhaps you wouldn't mind coming after I've been down a few minutes?' whispered Mrs. Brice, consciously.

Jean took the hint, and after waiting a short time so that Thomas Brice should not suspect what had been his wife's errand, she descended to the little parlour again.

'Will you let me go on with baby's frock, Mrs. Brice? I want something to do.'

'You are very good, I'm sure, miss; and works beautiful, that you do!' said the good woman, putting the little frock and cotton box before Jean, and then returning to her corner, where she was doing some washing.

She appeared to Jean to be nearly always washing in the evenings. Indeed, the smallness of her children's wardrobes obliged her to do a little every day, mostly after they were gone to bed, so as to have clean socks and pinafores ready for them in the morning. But there was not the consequent discomfort to be seen in many a poor home. Her tub was kept in one corner of the room, and the latter was always delicately

clean, the soapsuds being used to scrub it out the last thing every night. Moreover, the fireplace was always clean and tidy, and she managed to keep a bright little fire burning by adding a few pieces of coal and coke at the time, so that there was no necessity for the waste of constant stirring and sudden makings-up.

‘You may as well get me half an ounce of bacca before you begin again, Martha,’ said her husband, going on in a friendly way to inform Jean that he was nothing without his ‘bacca.’

Mrs. Brice wiped her arms, counted out some farthings from a cup on the mantel-shelf, and started off on her errand. ‘If anyone comes, you will tell them I shan’t be long, Thomas.’

‘All right.’

A few minutes passed silently. Jean was not inclined to talk, and Thomas Brice was reading, or affecting to read, a journal in his hand. The silence was broken by some sharp raps upon the counter, and a small voice bawling out ‘Shop !’

‘The missis will be back in a minute !’ called out her lord and master ; adding, with a confidential smile to Jean, that ‘serving them little shavers with lolipops wasn’t in his line.’

‘Indeed !’

There was silence again. Mrs. Brice came hurrying in, presented the tobacco to her hus-

band, served the small customer, and returned to her washing again.

‘There’s a capital thing in here this week, mother,’ presently said Thomas Brice, turning his paper over, and giving a side glance in Jean’s direction. ‘The man that wrote it must have heard my speech at the club last week, I think. It’s called “What keeps the Working-Man Down ?” and some of it is word for word what I said.’

‘To think of that, now !’ ejaculated good Mrs. Brice, feeling called upon to say something.

Then, as Jean silently stitched on, he more directly appealed to her—‘Now, what should you say, miss ? I should like to know what you think it is that keeps a working-man down ?’

Jean gravely considered a few moments, then replied, ‘Idleness, I suppose.’

‘I didn’t mean what keeps him out of work,’ he replied, eyeing her rather surlily ; ‘though it ain’t always idleness that does that. What I ask is—What starves his intellec’? What keeps a man down to the level of a brute, and prevents his holding up his head among his fellow-men ?’

Jean conscientiously considered again (not aware that Thomas Brice did not intend his questions to be answered by anybody but himself, and

only paused to give point to his ready-prepared peroration), and then quietly said—‘I really do not know, if it be not idleness, Mr. Brice. That is, if he is in health, and can get any kind of work to do.’

‘Work won’t feed his intellec’.’

‘But it would earn something to feed it.’

‘You speak like a fine lady, as don’t know what work is, miss. Work won’t pay for more than victuals and drink, in these days. Come, we will put in easier,’ he added, in consideration of her sex. ‘Say he’s a carpenter by trade, like me, and say he feels that he’s up to doing something better than starving only to get bread and cheese, how is he to set to work—What’s he to do?’

‘Prove it, I suppose,’ returned unconscious Jean, calmly snipping off a length of thread.

‘How’s that to be done? How would you set about doing that, without anybody to lend you a helping hand? Come now, miss; I should like to know how you would set about proving it.’

‘Well,’ said Jean, ‘if I were a carpenter, I think I would begin by trying to make the very best stool that ever was made.’

‘You don’t call making a stool work for a man’s intellec’?’ loftily.

‘Oh, yes, I do. I meant a wonderful stool,

you know ; one that would require extraordinary intelligence to make it.'

' But how if you wanted to do something more useful than making stools, to help your fellow-men ? What if you felt you had got the stuff in you, say, to write a book as would set the whole world a thinking and raise humanity to —to a higher level ? '

' Then I would write it,' promptly replied Jean.

' How could you do that, if you'd got five or six mouths to feed—(from constantly repeating it at meetings, and so forth, he had come to believe that he did feed the five or six mouths)—by hard work ? '

' It would take all the longer, of course ; being written at odd times,' said Jean ; ' but it would be a pleasant change from the other kind of work, and even half an hour a day would tell in time.'

Mr. Brice puffed silently at his pipe awhile ; refreshed himself with a glance at his journal, and then said, with an indulgent smile, ' You only look at the outside of things, that's what it is, miss. If you had gone into the question as deep as I have, you'd see the rights of it, and know that the real cause of the working-man being kept down is because the rich are afraid of us. They know that

many of us are more than a match for them ; if we could only get a start, we should soon change places with them. When it becomes a question of man and man, then you will see. The time will come—it's getting nearer and nearer every day—when the distinction of wealth will be done away with.'

' I am glad to hear it. There isn't much distinction in merely being rich, is there ? ' said Jean, her thoughts reverting to Mrs. Tweedie's glories.

Thomas Brice felt that he was beginning to make himself understood at last.

' What I say is this, miss. Why should a poor man be made to slave his life out, and kept down to the level of a brute, while another has got thousands a year, and nothing to do but pamper his appetites ? Why isn't one of God's creatures as good as another ? '

' He ought to be,' said Jean.

' That's just what I ses ; he ought to be. But he isn't. A poor man has got no opportunity of showing the stuff that's in him.'

' I don't know about poor men, Mr. Brice ; but poor women have got lots of opportunity. Look at Mrs. Brice (the latter had been called out to serve a customer). Anyone must be blind indeed not to see her superiority. She seems to spend her whole time in helping others ; even

finds time to help her neighbours, as well as spend her life for you and the children.'

'That's true about mother,' said Johnny, who had come in and stood leaning against the mantelshelf, listening open-mouthed to the conversation. 'But who would change with her? See how hard she's got to work, and all for nothing.'

'When I once gets a start she shan't work so hard,' said Thomas Brice, his face rather redder than usual. 'Not but what she likes doing it, don't you, mother?'

'Likes doing what, Thomas?' a little wearily asked his wife, as she re-entered the room, and bent over her tub again.

'Why, keeping things shipshape and the children clean and tidy?'

'Oh, yes; I never minds work, Thomas.'

'Let me help you, Mrs. Brice, that tub is too heavy for you,' said Jean, springing to her assistance, as the former was with some difficulty making her way with it towards the back scullery.

'Go and help your mother, Johnny,' said Thomas Brice.

'Oh, yes!' returned Johnny with a grin, keeping his hands in his pockets, and taking his father's words as a jest.

Notwithstanding Mrs. Brice's protests, Jean assisted her until the tub was safely deposited in

the sink. Something in her face as she took her seat again brought forth the answering remark from Thomas Brice, 'You don't call that men's work, miss ?'

'The few I have known were gentlemen,' hotly returned Jean, who was fast losing her temper.

'Then I'm sure you haven't seen 'em carrying tubs.'

'I am glad I know one who would not sit still and watch a weak woman doing it.'

'You seem very ready at flinging out at other people,' said Mr. Brice, beginning to lose his temper.

'I'm sure miss didn't mean anything unkind, Thomas ;' anxiously put in his wife, who from bitter experience had a terror of his getting offended.

'I did mean it ; but perhaps I ought not to have said it,' said the girl, remembering Miss Gilber's warning. 'I was in a temper, and I'm sorry, Mr. Brice.'

He would have been more satisfied had she omitted the first part of her apology, but to his wife's great relief he graciously accepted it. 'You see, miss, you haven't got rent and taxes on your mind,' he somewhat irrelevantly explained. For

some reason he could hardly explain to himself, he was still a little desirous to set himself right with Jean. ' You've no call to complain about your station in life. You'll be getting a hundred a year or so and your keep, with servants to wait upon you, for jest spending two or three hours a day in teaching.'

' Oh, no, indeed I shall not, Mr. Brice. I was offered only nine pounds a year for teaching five children yesterday, and I am not quite sure that I was right in refusing it.'

' I thought ladies that could teach 'complishments, and things, got a deal more than that, miss.'

' Some do—some get as much as you talk about, Mr. Brice, but I could not.'

' Well, at the worst you've got friends as would help you, I daresay, miss?' eyeing her curiously.

' Oh, yes; they do not want me to work at all. I have a good home with them, only I prefer working for myself.'

' Prefer working!' ejaculated Johnny, staring open-mouthed at Jean, as though he were regarding some wonderful phenomenon which had not before come under his notice.

Thomas Brice puffed silently away at his pipe, quietly working out a solution to a certain pro-

blem which had somewhat puzzled him before. His lodger had run away from her home, no doubt in a temper—as she called it ; it was easy to see she'd got a temper of her own, and was now going to play at getting her living.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SUCCESS AT LAST.

‘DIDN’t you say that miss was at some school near here, mother?’ said Thomas Brice, after Jean had retired to her own room that night.

‘Yes; at Ivy Lodge, along the road: Miss Bowles’, you know.’

‘Ah!’ smoking complacently on. For he fancied he had hit upon a certain scheme for the carrying out of which brains would be of more service than labour.

‘Isn’t she kind and good, Thomas? Not a bit set up, though everyone can see she’s quite a lady.

‘That’s to be proved,’ returned her husband with a wise air; ‘She hasn’t got quite the cut of the lady about her, to my mind.’ The ladies of his experience had ordered him hither and thither, and never condescended to matters beyond carpentering with him. He would not acknowledge to himself that Jean’s good or bad opinion of him

was worth anything. Was Thomas Brice, capable of doing great things for the benefit of humanity, to be influenced by anything a chit of a girl might say? Certainly not. If she had once heard him at the club she would have known better than to try.

Nevertheless, from that night a change crept gradually, and for some time imperceptibly, over the Brice household. Though Thomas Brice still kept up his own dignity in his home by doing nothing and requiring as much waiting upon as ever, he began to make his children do a little in the way of assisting their over-worked mother, and his orders were enforced with blows if not immediately obeyed.

When father was at home, Susy and Sissy were no longer allowed to remain playing if the hearth wanted sweeping up, or the baby required nursing. Moreover, Johnny was threatened with the first place that turned up, and in the meantime ordered hither and thither in a way which he highly disapproved.

Thomas Brice began to experience quite a moral enjoyment in setting others to work, proving quite to his own satisfaction his fitness to govern. When the new order of things came about he would take a prominent position in the government of the people, by right of his capacity to

rule. Not that there was no rebellion in his present kingdom. All sorts of murmurs rose from his eldest-born, Johnny, who was found much less amenable to the new rule than the younger ones.

‘Oh, yes, father is fond of showing off; it is easy to set other people to work,’ and so forth. And once or twice the indignant father had caught the words, ‘Why don’t you set to work yourself, then?’

Punishment followed as a matter of course, and Johnny howled out his acknowledgment of the force of that kind of argument. Nevertheless, he managed to make Thomas Brice understand that he was no longer a hero in his son’s eyes. ‘Father’s a sneak; he won’t do nothing hisself, and he’s always a knocking me about for not wanting to do things!’ again and again grumbled Johnny to his mother.

On the whole, poor Mrs. Brice would perhaps have preferred things going on in the old way. She would gladly have dispensed with the assistance of the children—rendered with sobs and enforced, so to speak, at the point of the bayonet. She could not yet realise the good which might arise after this unpleasant state of transition.

The time was going on wearily enough with Jean, who found her small store of money rapidly diminishing, whilst no engagement offered. She had

twice lent small sums of money, now to make up his rent, and now for taxes, to her landlord, through his wife, who seemed to have been worked up to the pitch of desperation before she could ask.

‘I know she hasn’t got much money, Thomas ; she spends so little on herself, won’t even take an omnibus now, unless it’s raining fast.’

‘Did you ask her what I told you ?’

‘Yes ; but she did not seem to like to say where her friends lived. She said she would never apply to them, and never go back.’

‘We shall see !’ nodded the husband. ‘I know what to do when the right time comes.’

Jean went regularly every morning to Miss Gilbert’s ; it seemed her only chance. But day after day it was the same story, ‘Nothing that will suit you, I fear, Miss Bell ;’ with occasionally a kindly look, and the addition, ‘This is just our dullest season.’

The few ladies Jean saw gave her to understand, more or less gracefully, that her not being able to offer any reference was an insurmountable difficulty.

She had been quite earnest in telling Mrs. Brice that she would neither return nor apply to her friends. She felt that it was impossible to go back to Fernside. Had there been no other reason—had she not awakened to the fact that Maude had

taken an unconquerable aversion to her—she felt that she could not meet Nugent Orme as she ought to be able to meet the husband of another woman. It had been all very well to tell herself that she would overcome her love for Maude's husband ; she was painfully conscious that she had not yet succeeded in doing so.

Her enquiries of Mrs. Brice as to the probability of being able to obtain a living by doing plain needlework, were listened to with a grave shake of the head.

‘ My dear, I’m sorry to say as there’s five or six trying to keep body and soul together at it in this very street.’ After a while she added, a little doubtfully, ‘ I didn’t like to name it before, but if so be as you didn’t mind teaching French and the pianner to our baker’s wife’s children, she is looking out for somebody to learn them, and pays sixpence an hour ? ’

‘ Mind ! I should be very thankful to do it ; why of course I should,’ responded Jean. ‘ Will you kindly say a word for me, Mrs. Brice ? ’

‘ That I will, miss, and welcome.’

But it turned out that the baker’s wife had engaged a governess for her daughters. Mrs. Brice did not consider it necessary to inform Jean how many candidates there had been for the six-pence an hour.

‘ Do you think if I were to ask at some of the shops, myself?’ enquired Jean.

‘ Well, there could be no harm in asking, could there?’ returned Mrs. Brice, trying to look hopeful.

But before Jean had acquired the necessary courage, fortune seemed inclined to smile upon her. That morning she went as usual to Miss Gilbert’s, and began her weary waiting sitting in the outer office, silent and apart from the other candidates. She fancied that they knew of the disparity between herself and them, and that they avoided her in consequence; whilst they interpreted her shyness and reserve to mean pride, and made no advances towards her. But there was very little opportunity for forming friendship in any case. New faces were constantly coming and going. Even her acquaintance who had complained of having waited so long, had found an engagement at last.

‘ Will you come this way, Miss Bell?’ said Miss Gilbert.

Jean rose and went into the inner office slowly and hopelessly. She was getting accustomed to disappointment now. She was introduced to a slight, reticent-looking lady of between fifty and sixty years of age, dressed in the fashion of some thirty years back, her grey hair being

arranged in clusters of tight short curls beneath her large black silk bonnet.

‘This is Miss Bell, Miss Drake.’

Jean bowed, conscious that two keen dark eyes were surveying her from head to foot.

‘This lady is seeking a companion, Miss Bell,’ went on Miss Gilbert, ‘and thinks that you might possibly suit her. I have mentioned the slight disadvantage about reference, but Miss Drake thinks that might probably be looked over.’

‘If we can find the right kind of lady,’ put in Miss Drake. ‘Miss Gilbert’s very high personal opinion of you, has, I acknowledge, great weight with me, Miss Bell.’ Miss Gilbert had stretched a point in Jean’s favour. In truth, she thought she had said a great deal more than a woman of her experience ought to have said about a comparative stranger. But, some way, she never had been quite sensible and business-like with regard to Jean. Of late she had told herself, ‘I really must get the child some kind of situation or I shall be doing something ridiculous—asking her to come and live with me, or something.’

Jean lifted her eyes gratefully to Miss Gilbert’s face.

‘Moreover, it is not a disadvantage in my eyes that—’ Miss Drake mentally added—‘you have quarrelled with your friends; but,’ she said,

‘there have been family differences, and you will not be always wanting to go home, which makes young people unsettled, besides affording opportunity for foolish tattling. My sister and I require a lady who is truthful, self-controlled, and good-tempered, rather than merely accomplished, and she must not object to a very quiet life.’

‘I should not object to it,’ nervously began Jean, ‘and I do tell the truth, but——’

‘So I informed Miss Drake,’ put in Miss Gilbert, with a warning glance at Jean.

‘Capable of self-control, I hope?’

Jean hurriedly examined herself—‘Was she?’

‘I *think* I am, Miss Drake,’ she replied, a little doubtfully.

But Miss Drake did not perceive any reservation, and went on—‘The salary we offer is not a very large one, Miss Bell, but it might be increased if you suit us. We offer forty pounds a-year.’

‘Forty pounds!’ ejaculated Jean. ‘That is much more than I hoped for.’

Miss Gilbert passed her hand over her mouth to conceal a smile. But Miss Drake was evidently not a lady after Mrs. Tweedie’s pattern, merely replying—

‘There is not very much required; merely a little music occasionally, an hour or so’s reading, and

the capability for conversing or remaining silent when conversation is not desired.'

'I would try my very best,' eagerly said Jean, so dazzled by the prospect as hardly to be able to display the required capacity for self-control. 'I am not clever, but—'

'We do not require a young lady who thinks herself clever,' returned Miss Drake.

'I *must* say it,' thought Jean, wringing her hands under her cloak in her fear of what the saying it might involve. Then she began, in a low agitated voice, 'About my temper—'

'I really do not think you need have any scruples upon that score, Miss Bell,' impatiently interrupted Miss Gilbert.

'Your scruples are very creditable to you, nevertheless, Miss Bell,' said Miss Drake, with a satisfied nod. After a few moments' consideration she went on—'Well, I think I may go so far as to ask you to come to Drayford House as soon as possible: on Thursday, if that day will be convenient to you.'

'To try how you like me?' asked Jean, with a glowing face.

'I hope it may be to remain permanently, Miss Bell.' Then she added—'In taking you without a reference we have a right, I think, to

expect that on your side you will do your best to make yourself companionable.'

The meaning of which little tag to the agreement Jean would come to understand later. She promptly replied—

‘Indeed you have, Miss Drake, and I will do my very best.’

‘That is all we require. Let me see—this is Tuesday. If you can arrange to come to us by mid-day, Thursday, we shall be glad to receive you. Drayford House is about half an hour’s drive from the Twickenham railway station, and you will find a fly waiting to convey you thither if you go down by the train which leaves Waterloo at twelve o’clock. You will afterwards understand my reasons for not entering further into particulars respecting our habits and so forth. I can only promise you a very comfortable home if you have the good sense to appreciate it.’ Then she held out her hand. ‘Good morning, Miss Bell. Miss Gilbert, I am obliged by the interest you have taken in the matter, and will remit you the fees, whatever they may be, incurred by Miss Bell or myself, if you will let me have a memorandum. Good morning.’

Jean endeavoured to express something of the gratitude she felt towards her kind friend, Miss Gilbert, and then set forth on her homeward walk with a light heart.

Entering the little shop parlour, she commenced proceedings by putting her arms round Mrs. Brice's neck, and indulging in a good cry.

‘Am I not fortunate at last?’ she ejaculated, when at length her news was told.

‘Well it do seem lucky, to be sure, dearie. Forty pound a year and your keep, for only reading and playing the pianner, and being good-tempered! Why that's better than teaching, ain't it?’

‘Of course it is.’

‘Did you say as there was too sisters, dearie?’

‘Yes.’ And, for the first time, it occurred to Jean as rather odd that two sisters living together should require a companion.

‘And did she seem a nice spoken lady, miss?’

‘Yes,’ said Jean, a little hesitatingly. ‘As pleasant as you could expect a stranger to be;’ and she added, recollecting Mrs. Tweedie, ‘She really *is* a lady.’

For some cause unguessed at by his wife, Thomas Brice appeared more disappointed at hearing the news than even the loss of a good lodger could account for.

‘You know we did not expect Miss to stop longer than a few days at first, Thomas; and she's been with us nigh upon a month now.’ A happy

month it had proved for the poor over-worked wife. When the last good-bye had been spoken, and the cab had turned the corner of the street, Mrs. Brice stood crying on the doorstep, feeling as though all the sunlight had been suddenly withdrawn from her life. She returned to the little back room with red eyelids and quivering lips, hardly able to manage a smile at the wonders displayed by Sissy and Susy.

Just before her departure Jean had given them a hint that they would find something in her little room. They had lost no time in the quest, and there, on the bed, were two beautiful dolls, so alike that it was impossible to dispute over them, a gay rattle for baby, a wonderful knife for Johnny, and a nice warm dress for mother, with a golden sovereign pinned in its folds.

For Jean felt so rich now—quite able to afford the luxury of making these little presents. Was she not going to be rich?

CHAPTER XXIX.

NEW FRIENDS.

ON arriving at the Twickenham station, Jean found a fly waiting to convey her to Drayford House. Her tiny trunk was speedily deposited by the driver's side, and she was journeying on again towards her destination. She peered curiously out at the houses she passed on the road. 'Was it this? Ah, what a pretty place—that looked a real home!' Then she now and again caught sight of the river, and wondered if it would be her good fortune to live near it. How delightful if Drayford House should prove to be one of those pretty places with fine trees about it, and with grounds running down to the river! But she presently began to grow a little impatient in her eagerness to know what fate had in store for her. Miss Drake had said it was only half an hour's drive from the station to the house. Surely they had been longer than that on the road! How slowly the stupid man seemed to be driving!

The y turned into a branch road, and, in another two minutes, stopped before a massive, antique-looking gate let into a high wall. The man slowly descended from the box and rang a hanging bell—far above the reach of mischievous boys.

‘If I could only see the house!’ thought impatient Jean, peering curiously out. ‘The wall seems to go up to the sky!’

A small trap-door was pushed aside from within, and, after someone had carefully reconnoitred, the gate was grudgingly opened by a stern-looking elderly woman. Without taking the slightest notice of Jean’s timid enquiry if this were Miss Drake’s, or even vouchsafing a glance towards her, the woman bade the driver put the young lady’s luggage inside, and not be all day about it. It was done quickly enough, and without any undue expenditure of strength. The woman’s tight face relaxed into as near a smile as it was capable of expressing, as she glanced down at the shabby little trunk and bag which constituted Jean’s luggage. The latter took out her purse. But the woman put the fare, which she held ready, into the man’s hand, and, ignoring his thanks and cheery ‘Good day,’ unceremoniously shut the door in his face, and carefully locked it.

Jean found herself standing in a covered way leading from the gate to the house, a little uncomfortably, conscious that she was locked away from the outer world. But she was allowed no time for reflection.

‘This way, if you please,’ said the woman, unceremoniously taking the lead. She was not attractive in appearance. Tall and straight and grim, and out-of-date-looking, from her face and figure down to the smallest item in her dress, she seemed a walking protest against everything in the shape of attractiveness; a white muslin neckerchief being pinned primly across the breast of her faded brown silk dress, and the frilling of her cap setting as stiffly round her hard face as though it were carved in stone.

Jean followed, not more confidently for hearing the words—‘Chit! Baby! Doll!’ murmured by her grim conductress. They went up the covered entrance, and passed through a wide, old-fashioned doorway, into a large square hall; its chequered black and white marble floor covered here and there with tiger-skin mats. But, although the general aspect was rather cold and gloomy, the huge pictures, specimens of old armour, and quaintly-shaped chairs, almost black with age, imparted to it an air of romance in Jean’s eyes. Her conductress paused, looked

doubtfully at her a moment, then opened a door facing the entrance, and announced 'Miss Bell!'

Jean timidly advanced into a long room, running the width of the house; its high narrow windows opening to the ground, and commanding a view of a large old-fashioned garden, to which the predominance of yews and other dark shrubs imparted a somewhat weird and sombre appearance. The aspect of the room itself was not less gloomy and depressing. Although the finely-carved old furniture would have been almost priceless in the eyes of an antiquary, it certainly required a more cheerful background. Walls, curtains, carpet, and furniture, all looked dark and heavy together.

Jean bowed to a lady, who rose at her entrance from a seat on the right of the fireplace, and whom she supposed to be the same that had engaged her. But a voice on the left said, 'Good morning, Miss Bell;' and then Jean saw an exact counterpart rising from a seat on the left. So exactly alike were the two ladies, that the young girl stood for a moment looking from one to the other quite bewildered. But the lady on the left offered her hand, and introduced the other as 'My sister, Miss Bell—Miss Drake.'

Then Jean obeyed her courteous gesture, and seated herself in a high-backed chair, apparently

placed ready for her, exactly in the centre, at a sufficient distance from the fire, between the two ladies.

‘ You did not find the journey here a fatiguing one, Miss Bell ? ’

‘ Oh, no, not in the least, I shouldn’t have minded if it had been ever so much longer.’

‘ You do not object to railway travelling ? ’

‘ I like it very much, Miss Drake. It’s the flying along, and putting the bits together.’

‘ I beg your pardon ? ’

‘ The pretty bits of scenery—making pictures out of them,’ explained Jean.

‘ Oh, indeed,’ on the right.

‘ You have not travelled much, I presume, Miss Bell ? ’ on the left.

‘ Only three times that I can remember, Miss Drake. Once from London to Cambridgeshire, once back, and now here.’

‘ My sister is the elder, Miss Bell.’

‘ I beg pardon,’ said Jean ; adding, with a smile, ‘ I shall know better by-and-by ; but you are so very much alike ! ’

‘ Alike ! ’

‘ Alike ! ’ repeated both ladies, with what Jean thought sounded very much like anger in their tones. Then went on the lady on her right—‘ I do not think any two persons could be more

essentially dissimilar than are my sister and myself, Miss Bell.'

'I cannot understand anyone not perceiving the difference; alike, indeed!' from the left, each lady drawing herself up with an indignant air. After a few moments, recommenced the lady on the right—'I must beg you for the future to recollect that *I* am Miss Drake, Miss Bell.'

'And be good enough to remember that I infinitely prefer being Miss Barbara,' severely, from the left.

'I will do my best,' replied Jean, trying to fix upon some mark of difference by which to distinguish one from the other, but failing to detect any. Both ladies so exactly resembled each other, in feature, colouring, and expression. Their thin narrow faces, keen dark eyes, aquiline noses, long upper lips, reticent-looking mouths, and decided chins, were the very counterparts of each other. 'If they always sit on the same side of the fire as they are sitting now, I might know by that,' thought Jean.

'Have you taken luncheon, Miss Bell?'

'Yes, thank you, Miss Barbara,' returned Jean, who had indulged in a bun at the railway station.

'Then probably you would like to refresh your toilet,' said Miss Barbara, ringing a bell

by her side. ‘And, if you would like to occupy yourself in unpacking and arranging your wardrobe, pray consider yourself free until the dinner hour. Martha will render any assistance you may require. We dine at six;’ adding to the woman who obeyed the summons, the same that had admitted Jean—‘Show Miss Bell to her room, Martha, and do what you can to assist her there.’

‘Very well, ma’am.’

Martha led the way up a grand old staircase, with elaborately carved oak balusters and a boar-hunt painted on the walls, to a gallery. Then, opening a massive door, she pushed back an inner one, and ushered Jean into a bed-room so large and grandly furnished, in the same dark gloomy fashion as the lower rooms, that Jean’s shabby little trunk and bag looked like impertinent intruders there. The high narrow windows commanded the same view as that from the room they had just quitted.

Martha gravely opened the doors of a huge wardrobe, disclosing great gulfs of space: accommodation enough for the contents of a dozen such trunks as Jean’s, and then proceeded to open four or five great drawers. Jean broke into a merry laugh. How many years had elapsed since such a laugh had echoed in that room!

‘This is all I have in the world ; and the room I have just come from would hardly hold it. What a change, isn’t it ?’

‘I suppose it is,’ said Martha, her face slightly relaxing again. But she was looking grim enough the next moment as she said, with unwilling politeness, ‘If you don’t like this room you can have your choice of two others ; though there isn’t much difference in them, that I can see.’

‘No, thank you, unless there is one not quite so large and grand. This is so much better than any room I have ever had. I mean grander,’ her thoughts reverting to her cosy nest at Fernside, to which it was impossible to compare this for comfort.

‘They are all about the same,’ repeated Martha.

‘This must be a very large house, is it not ?’

‘Yes.’ Then, as she stooped to unfasten the straps of the trunk, and Jean was proceeding to take off her bonnet and cloak—‘You are very young to set up for being a companion ?’

‘Not so young as you would imagine. How old should you think me ?’ returned Jean, turning a laughing rosy face towards the old woman.

‘Well, I suppose you’re over ten.’

‘Oh, Martha ! Why I am nearly seventeen !’

‘And I suppose you think it is quite a grand

thing to be a companion. It sounds so pleasant, don't it? You're expecting a fine time of it, I warrant; lots of gaiety and gallanting about. Given up a good home, maybe, to play at being independent of your friends and getting money for yourself, and expects it's going to be all companying, and dancing, and fiddling?'

'Oh, no, indeed, Martha! Why, I am as poor as poor, and expected to have to work ever so hard!'

'Well, maybe you won't be altogether disappointed about that; you'll find it hard enough to please you, I daresay;' chuckled Martha. 'No nice young men to comfort you, neither.'

'I don't want any.'

Martha chuckled again with a side look up into the bonnie face. Jean knelt down, unlocked her trunk, and lifted out her best dress. 'Will this do for dinner, do you think, Martha? I have only these two black and two linen ones.'

'There was enough spent on them to buy two or three more,' said the old woman, eyeing the rich crape trimmings. 'But you'll find you won't want much in the dress way here.'

The dresses were hung in the wardrobe, and Jean's small store of underclothing spread over the bottom of one of the drawers. Then Martha stood eyeing the girl as she arranged her long hair,

half conscious what a pretty picture she made with her round white arms raised, as she deftly wound the soft gold-brown plaits into a crown about her head. Not that Martha would for the world have acknowledged herself capable of the weakness of admiring pictures, or anything else that was pretty.

‘Do you think I ought to go down now, Martha?’ presently asked Jean. ‘Miss Drake said that I might consider myself free until dinner time ; but that might have been only out of kindness, you know, and I have done all I want to do.’

‘Most people are glad of as much freedom as they can get,’ was all that Martha vouchsafed in the way of reply as she went out of the room.

Not quite sure that she ought to go down, Jean stood gazing out of one of the windows at the blank wall which shut out the view, whatever it was, beyond the garden. Why was the wall built so high that not even from this upper window could be seen anything beyond? ‘One feels as though built in without any chance of escape,’ she murmured, beginning to be a little affected by the depressing aspect of things. But she resolutely battled against it, and turned to her usual panacea against unpleasant reflection, getting out her school books and plodding steadily at work until she heard a clock chime the quarter to six. Putting

away her books, she went down to the room she had at first been ushered into, stopping by the way to introduce herself, and as she termed it make friends with a picture which attracted her attention in the gallery. It represented the interior of a grand old hall, at one of the deep oriel windows of which, in the red glory of sunset, were two figures—a fair girl, standing with clasped hands and tender upturned eyes before a noble-looking cavalier, who was listening to her words with bowed head and hand upon his sword-hilt. ‘You do not mind my looking, do you, dear?’ murmured Jean; ‘I have had to say good-bye, too; a worse good-bye than yours, for he will come back to you. Ah, I am sure of it, after he has gained the victory, and you will be all the prouder of him when he has proved himself what you believe him to be.’

CHAPTER XXX.

LIFE AT DRAYFORD HOUSE.

JEAN found the two ladies seated as she had left them on either side the fireplace. They were reading, each having a table by her side upon which were books, papers, needlework, &c. Each said a few polite words to Jean, expressing a hope that she liked her room and so forth, and both smiled a little at her enthusiasm about the house.

‘I hope you may continue to like the old house, Miss Bell; two or three of the ladies who stayed with us complained of finding it dull,’ said the lady on the left, whom Jean was learning to know as Miss Barbara. Looking doubtfully at the young bright face, she added, ‘But possibly you do not depend so much upon your surroundings as do most people?’

‘Yes; I think I do,’ said Jean, her thoughts reverting to Mrs. Tweedie’s glories. ‘I do not think I could be happy in some houses. They seem to have nothing to tell you but about them-

selves, and the furniture looks so conceited about having cost so much. I am sure I shall not be dull here when I have learned to know the things more and they don't mind me.'

'I hope you are not romantic, Miss Bell,' said Miss Drake. 'Take my advice, and do not encourage a tendency to be enthusiastic. You will probably find that your enthusiasm is turned into a weapon against yourself by colder and more calculating natures.'

'There is another and better reason for not indulging in sentimentality,' said Miss Barbara. 'My sister might have added that such a tendency might possibly lead you into very ridiculous as well as improper relations with your fellow-creatures.'

'But,' said sister on the right, with a cold smile at Jean, 'there is something even worse than being enthusiastic, Miss Bell; I trust that you are not one of those very objectionable people who fancy they have no weaknesses. According to my experience those who pride themselves upon their superiority over others are not only wanting in the Christian grace of love to the neighbour but capable of the meanest acts.'

'Nobody ever thought I was without weaknesses—' Jean was cheerfully beginning, when the door opened and dinner was announced.

The lady on the left rose and led the way, her sister and Jean following. Another grand old room, furnished after the same style as the rest of the house, only a trifle more massively, in dining-room fashion and with fine old pictures—mostly portraits of the Miss Drakes' ancestors—on the walls. Although this room was in the front of the house, the view from the windows was not more cheerful than that from the drawing-room—the only difference being that there was not quite so much distance between the windows and the high frowning walls as at the back of the house.

‘I wish there were not quite so much wall everywhere !’ thought Jean. In the meantime she had quite forgotten to note which was the elder sister again. ‘Now which is Miss Drake?’ she speculated uneasily, glancing from one to the other. ‘Oh, of course she is at the head of the table !’ But when she addressed the lady sitting there as Miss Drake, she received a sharp rebuke from her. ‘I informed you that I am not Miss Drake, and I must beg you to remember it, Miss Bell.’

‘I will try,’ murmured Jean, apologetically.

The lady at the bottom of the table said gently—‘Your mistake was a very natural one, Miss Bell. It is not at all surprising that you should expect to see an elder sister in an elder sister’s place

‘ Unless you had reason to believe that the elder had forfeited her right to occupy it,’ sharply put in Miss Barbara. ‘ Shall I send you some chicken, Miss Bell?’

‘ If you please,’ returned bewildered Jean. She noticed that each lady helped herself from the dish set before her, and that each had her own servant, who, except to attend upon Jean, did not leave her own side of the table. Even the sweets were, as the other courses, exactly the same at each end of the table, so that neither lady had to assist the other, or consult her wishes in any way. Both were manifestly gentlewomen, and studiously polite to Jean when she herself were in question; courteously sending whatever was best to her, and the dinner, though unpretending, was extremely good, as well as daintily dressed and served—the well-trained servants moving deftly and silently about their work. They were two middle-aged women, with the stolid look of respectability in their faces.

‘ We do not employ men-servants, you see, Miss Bell,’ said Miss Barbara, when dessert was set on and the women had quitted the room.

For lack of anything else to say, Jean murmured a supposition that ‘ Miss Barbara preferred women-servants.’

‘ No, I cannot say that I do to wait at table.

Until a certain date we always kept men-servants and found them more efficient in the work. But circumstances obliged us to discontinue employing them in this house. With the exception of the gardener, who is an elderly man, and does not come regularly, we do not employ men-servants.'

'Indeed,' said Jean, wondering what the circumstances were. Happening to glance at Miss Drake she noticed that the colour in her face was a great deal heightened.

With a smile upon her lips Miss Barbara rose from the table and led the way to the drawing-room. There each lady took her seat by the fire; each having a reading lamp placed upon her own table by her side, and this time Jean took care to note which was the elder and which the younger. Her own place was evidently intended to remain in the centre between the two. Miss Barbara, who seemed to take the lead in the arrangements, politely bade Jean make herself at home with her surroundings. 'My sister and I generally indulge in a nap after dinner, Miss Bell. Perhaps you would like to amuse yourself with the books, or you will find some fine engravings on that stand, if you prefer looking at them.' Jean delightedly availed herself of the privilege. By the time tea was brought in she had come to the conclusion that she was the most fortunate girl in all the

world to be permitted to live in communion with such treasures. She was requested to make tea, an urn being brought in in the old-fashioned way, and each lady took it at her own separate table. Both continued very pleasant and kind in their bearing towards herself. ‘But how very odd they do not speak to each other,’ thought Jean, as the evening wore on; ‘I really do not believe that I have heard them exchange a single word since I came!’ Moreover, she was beginning to feel uncomfortable under the impression that when she pleased one sister she displeased the other.

‘As my sister doubtless took you into her confidence from the beginning she will perhaps explain our daily habits and requirements to you, Miss Bell,’ gently said Miss Drake, when the tea equipage had been removed.

‘Will you be good enough to relate exactly what took place at our interview, Miss Bell?’ sternly said Miss Barbara. ‘I must beg of you to be as exact as possible if you do not wish yourself to be misjudged and accused of all sorts of evil plotting as well as me.’

‘I was only told that I was engaged to act as companion to two ladies; that I was required to be truthful, self-controlled, and good-tempered; that the salary was to be forty pounds a year;

and that if I did my best to be agreeable and useful the disadvantage of my not being able to give any reference would be looked over,' said Jean.

'Miss Barbara has displayed her usual wisdom and penetration,' said the elder lady, turning sarcastic eyes upon Jean's hot face.

Miss Barbara smiled. 'Quite a compliment, is it not, Miss Bell? Wisdom *and* penetration! I do not often get the credit for possessing any good quality whatever; but after this I shall quite plume myself upon being almost an average human being. I may now go on to endeavour to give you some idea of our daily life, and what is expected of you. Unhappily there is a division in our house; deceit and treachery—'

'And lying and slandering,' calmly from the elder.

'Have rendered it impossible that there can be the usual love and trust between relations—'

'*Quite* impossible!' in a quiet undertone from the opposite side.

'But, as Christian women, we consider it our duty to forgive if we cannot forget the past, and remain under the same roof. All that is expected of you is a strict neutrality, which, as you know nothing of the past, may be possible.'

'Under that circumstance only!' firmly from the right.

‘If my sister will allow me to proceed, Miss Bell, I may tell you we shall be glad to find you at the breakfast-table punctually at nine o’clock. Afterwards exercise in the garden until eleven ; reading until luncheon, at half-past one ; garden exercise, or an occasional drive and needlework until dinner ; music, reading, and now and then a rubber at whist between tea and prayers. You can attend the church, where we have a pew, once on Sunday ; my own and my sister’s state of health prevents our going.’

Jean bowed her acquiescence. It sounded pleasant and easy enough so far as she was concerned.

‘Shall I play something now, Miss Drake?’

‘Ask my sister, Miss Bell,’ replied the elder lady, stiffly.

‘We are not very musical,’ said Miss Barbara ; ‘but if you sing, my sister would probably like to hear a love song, only it *must* be something very sentimental.’

‘As my younger sister arrogates to herself the precedence in all things, pray sing first for her, Miss Bell ; and if you know any such, I should suggest the topics jealousy and revenge as most congenial.’

‘I don’t know any such songs,’ bluntly returned Jean. Then after a few moments she recollect

that good temper and self-control had been two things especially stipulated for, and went on more gently—‘ The little voice I have has not been much cultivated, and I only sing the simplest ballads ; but I will play, if you will allow me.’

She sat down to the piano and played through the best of the school show pieces she could remember, whilst the two ladies sat gazing with stony eyes into the fire. Afterwards she went on to play some Scotch airs ; but whilst softly going though ‘ Should auld acquaintance be forgot,’ unconsciously lingering tenderly over the notes, her eyes happened to turn towards her employers, and to her consternation she perceived that they were each regarding her with stern eyes and frowning brows. But before she had time to perceive in what she had offended, a clock chimed ten, the door opened, and eight or nine servants entered the room. The elderly woman who had first received Jean carried in a large bible and prayer-book, placed them on the table by Miss Barbara, and then knelt down with the others, each before a chair, whilst that lady read prayers. Afterwards the servants filed silently out again, and Jean stood waiting for her next instructions. They would be friends now—were probably only waiting until she was out of the way to make it

up comfortably. As she hoped, she was dismissed, each lady shaking hands with her, and courteously expressing a wish that she would sleep well in her new home.

Greatly relieved, Jean took her candle and went her way. The great staircase and gallery were more sombre and weird-looking by the light of her solitary candle, and all sorts of fantastic threatening shapes seemed to spring out from the deep gulf of shadow as though to bar her progress. Then, when she had reached the gallery, she stood hesitating, afraid of opening the wrong door. But presently she saw some person advancing from the opposite end of the gallery, from where she afterwards learned was the back staircase, and to her great relief the figure proved to be her first acquaintance, Martha.

‘I am so glad,’ ejaculated Jean. ‘I do not know which is the right door.’

‘I thought you might be wanting something or another,’ replied Martha ungraciously, opening one of the doors.

‘What a very large room at night, isn’t it?’

‘I don’t see that it’s any larger than it was in the day.’

‘But it looks so much larger, you know: so dark in the corners,’ with a little involuntary shudder.

Martha gave her a little side look. 'You oughtn't to bring such things as nerves here.'

'I do not think I am a nervous girl generally, but I'm not accustomed to such great places. They feel a little cold.'

'You can have a fire. There is no stint of anything here. Things are not done by halves in this house'—with the low chuckle which served Martha for a laugh.

'No, thank you. It is not that sort of cold.'

'Ah! I only know of one sort.'

'You *can* see the stars, Martha!' ejaculated Jean, who had pulled aside the heavy curtain and blind, and was gazing out into the night.

'Stars!' repeated Martha, contemptuously. 'Well, I hope it will do you good to see them.'

'Yes, it will,' gravely returned the girl.

'The real truth of it is, I expect you're beginning to feel mother-sick already,' said Martha, experiencing a sensation she could not remember ever having felt before, as she looked at Jean's face upturned to the stars.

'I do not remember either my mother or my father.' Then turning from the window, she added, a little wearily, 'Even the stars don't seem quite enough to-night. Would you mind my kissing you, Martha?'

Martha uttered a protest about not having

much belief in kissing, standing stiff and awkward in the middle of the room, and a faint flush rose to her face as the young girl's lips touched her cheek. But she was not going to be made uncomfortable (the feeling really was uncomfortable in its strangeness) by a chit of a girl like this!

‘You've been giving your mind up to some love nonsense, I expect.’

‘Love nonsense! Oh, Martha, *nonsense!* Why, if it were not for the love things would be ever so much harder to bear. I am afraid I should grow quite wicked!’

‘Oh, there's a lover, then?’

‘No;’ possessing herself of Martha's unwilling hand and rubbing her soft cheek against it. ‘I had one for a little while—a very little—and that has to last me all my life.’

‘Oh!’ dubiously replied Martha. ‘Got to last all your life, has it? I've known young ladies who have been disappointed in love before now, but it didn't take all their life to get over it.’

‘But I haven't been disappointed in love, Martha, and I shall never get over it. I feel just the same about it as ever. Why, it was not the love's fault, you foolish Martha,’ rubbing her cheek against the woman's shoulder, now that the latter's hands were not to be had, Martha having folded them tightly together over her apron.

‘What makes you talk such things to me?’ said Martha, turning her eyes away from the girl’s face and tightening her lips. ‘I’m not a sort people think they can talk nonsense to. What makes you?’

‘I don’t know,’ returned Jean, wondering at herself a little for doing so, as she remembered that she had felt no necessity for introducing the same subject to kind, sympathetic Mrs. Brice, and not tracing the thought sufficiently home to perceive why she was impelled to speak of love in this place. ‘I have not been accustomed to talk so; it’s the big room, or something.’

‘Well, that’s a reason, to be sure.’

Jean laughed, and then a few tears stole down her cheeks. ‘Don’t go away. Say you are not cross with me first, there’s a good Martha. There, I will not let you go until you have said something kind,’ putting her arms round the woman’s neck. ‘Do; just one little word—only one.’

‘Mercy me, what’s come to the girl? Kind words, indeed! What for, I should like to know?’

‘Oh! because of anything—because you are alive,’ glancing round the room a little nervously.

‘I tell you I’m not the sort, and I can’t be wasting my time talking nonsense here because

I'm alive, when I ought to be in bed and asleep. Besides, I'm not so took up with new faces as you seem to think. There, be quick and get into bed, do, and let me tuck you up before I go.'

'As if that is not kind!' laughed Jean, hastily slipping off her dress and loosening her hair.

'You make short work with your prayers,' said Martha, as the girl rose from her knees and sprang into bed.

'Haven't you got any enemies to pray for?'

'No,' sleepily. 'What a nice soft bed! Good night, Martha, dear.'

'Good night,' softly repeated Martha, looking down at the pure girlish face entering with a smile into the land of dreams. How ashamed would Martha have been could she have seen the expression of her own face at that moment. Martha, who prided herself upon having none of the weaknesses of ordinary mortals, to have her philosophy disturbed by a chit of a school-girl like this. She went quietly away, not noticing how careful she was in closing the door lest she should disturb the sleeping girl, and telling herself that to-morrow Jean must be made to understand that she had made a great mistake—there was nothing weak about Martha. 'How in the world she came to think she could talk to me in that fashion beats me. Nobody ever attempted it

before,' she thought, curiously examining her face in the glass to see if any wonderful change had taken place in its expression, and coming to the satisfactory conclusion that anyone must be daft indeed to think she was a sort you could talk love nonsense to. 'Love in this house!' she added, turning away from the glass with a chuckle. 'It will soon be starved out of here, I warrant! Martha, *dear*, too! Good night, Martha, *dear*! It's a good forty year since anyone was silly enough to call me *dear*.'

CHAPTER XXXI.

MARTHA'S WEAKNESS.

JEAN had time for a run round the garden before the breakfast hour, and although she found it quite as dreary as it appeared from the windows—wilderness would have been a fitter name for it—she was all the better for the fresh morning air; coming in with a blooming face as the clock struck nine. She was received very cordially by the Miss Drakes, each expressing a hope that she had found her room comfortable and had slept well, smiling at the enthusiasm of her reply. For she had quite got over the previous night's nervousness, and the very gloominess of the place was beginning to have a sort of weird fascination for her. It was not like any other place she had known. You could picture no tragedies at the Grange; it was a dear old nest, made expressly for love to dwell in, and light and air were welcome guests in every corner of it. Everything within and without treated you as a friend and took you into its confidence, the

trees and flowers and birds being upon such sympathetic terms with each other, that the birth of a rose seemed occasion for all sorts of chirpings and chatterings and rustlings. But here everything within the boundary of those frowning walls wore an air of mystery ; the very shrubs in the garden looking solemnly reticent, as though conscious of something which it was necessary to keep from the knowledge of strangers. Jean's imagination was excited as it had never been before. She replied to Miss Barbara's politely-expressed hope that she would find garden exercise sufficient by affirming that she should like it better than walking along roads. But when she went on to ask why the wall at the bottom of the garden was built so high and the pretty stone temple had been half destroyed, there was a dead silence a moment or two, and she saw their faces darken and knew that she had some way made a mistake.

Miss Barbara replied coldly, 'It is sufficient to say that it was necessary to build that wall, Miss Bell.'

'As a testimony to the vindictiveness of the person who built it, Miss Bell,' added Miss Drake.

'If only you were friends again,' thought Jean, perceiving that the 'making up,' as she in school-girl phrase termed it, had not come about

on the previous night. In her ignorance, she imagined that she had happened to arrive in the midst of a quarrel between the sisters. She did not know that no word had been directly addressed by one to the other for between thirty and forty years.

Both ladies continued to be kind and courteous to her, and the little she did in the way of reading, playing, or what not, was received in the best spirit. She did not find them very *exigeante* on the score of being amused; indeed, she was conscious that they were generally too much absorbed in their own reflections to hear what she was playing, or follow what she was reading. 'I really do not know what they will want me for when they are friends again,' she thought; beginning to feel uncomfortably conscious that the only real use they made of her was to talk at each other. But for this, her time passed pleasantly enough. During her intervals of leisure she was welcome to roam over the whole house, and dream over its treasures as much as she pleased, and she made for herself a quaint world of romance, from which she emerged with more and more difficulty when the time came to go on duty again. Then she found it still more difficult to think of Nugent Orme in the right way than she had done at Mrs. Brice's. Involuntarily her thoughts went out to

him in connection with everything that suggested aught that was great and good. Her fancy placed that helmet on his head and that breastplate over his shoulders, and saw him set forth, sword in hand, to conquer or die—had ever right such a champion! or she would picture him as he stood that day in the Grange woods, giving her up with the tender yearning in his eyes, and wonder if words had ever before sounded like that ‘Jean, Jean!’ The colour would spring to her cheeks and the light to her eyes as she would murmur again and again, ‘Can I ever be poor or sad with that “Jean! Jean!” to live upon?’ Then would come the bitter remembrance, growing, alas, more bitter every day now that he was Maude’s husband. ‘Maude’s husband,’ she repeated to herself over and over again, as she feverishly paced the gloomy garden. But it was all of no use. If he was Maude’s husband he was Jean’s hero. ‘What would he think of me if he knew?’ she murmured, as she vainly strove to forget him. Fortunately for herself she was obliged to gather back her thoughts when the time came for her to return to duty in the drawing-room again.

The only attempt which the Miss Drakes made at anything in the way of amusement was in playing whist, one lady alternately taking dummy and the other Jean as partner, and the hours so

spent were Jean's greatest trial. The game always culminated in so fierce a struggle for supremacy, and the subsequent triumph of the winner and bitter speeches of the loser were so painful to listen to, that Jean learned to dread the very sight of cards. But it was only a very little better when she was invited to read aloud, on the occasions when they were in the mood to listen to her. The books chosen were of the best, and the young girl read of great deeds told in thrilling words with heart exultant, cheeks aflame, and eyes brilliant with delight; or grew white and indignant over a tale of wrong. But, be the subject what it might, it always seemed to suggest some hidden meaning which gave offence to one or the other of her hearers.

‘It is consoling to know that *some* who have the power to wound disdain to use it, is it not, Miss Bell? *All* people do not enjoy injuring others, you see.’

‘It must be very terrible to feel cruel,’ said Jean. For which she received a smile from Miss Drake and a frown from Miss Barbara. At another time, ‘Deceit and treachery do not *always* succeed, you see, Miss Bell.’

‘It is a great pity if they ever do,’ bluntly replied Jean. ‘I never met with a deceitful

person ; but I am sure they must be dreadful to know.'

'Do not be too sure you have never met one, Miss Bell ;' with a gracious smile from Miss Barbara and a frown from Miss Drake, and so on, until the servants filed in to prayers, which were read by each sister in turn.

Martha had got into the habit of paying a visit to Jean's room the last thing every night, but she told herself that her only reason for doing so was because such a chit of a girl could not be trusted to see her candle safely out, and it was clearly her duty to look after her. But that last half hour in the day was becoming very precious to the old woman, opening out to her as it did an entirely new experience, although she would have been highly indignant at being supposed to look forward to it. She watched Jean curiously as days passed on, beginning to ask herself, 'What does she think of it now—will she be able to bear it ?' But she put no questions in words, and Jean volunteered no information. Indeed, her reticence respecting the Miss Drakes, as compared with her frankness upon all other points, herself in particular, not a little surprised Martha. It had been just the reverse with most of the ladies who had acted as companions at Drayford House. Whilst very curious to hear anything about the Miss Drakes,

and Martha considered a great deal too ready to talk about their defects, the ladies who had previously been there had not been very frank about their own affairs. ‘All they wanted you to know about them was that they had been accustomed to very grand society, and that it was a great come down to be obliged to do anything for money,’ thought Martha. She soon began to perceive a change creeping over Jean. But although the latter would not allow that there was any difference in her, and seemed surprised at Martha fancying there was, the woman could see that she was getting thinner and more feverish-looking, as though she wanted more fresh air.

‘Have you been into the garden twice to-day?’ she would ask crossly.

‘Yes.’

Then, trying to keep the usual brusque tone, Martha said, ‘If you would like a walk across the meadows or by the river, I daresay Miss Drakes wouldn’t mind your going sometimes if I went with you. You can’t be sent prancing all over the country by yourself, of course, but I shouldn’t mind going to see after you once or twice in a way.’

‘No, thank you, Martha, I don’t care about it; it’s less trouble walking in the garden,’ listlessly.

‘Less trouble, indeed ! What are you getting so fine and lackadaisical about ?’

‘Oh, nothing. I only feel a little tired sometimes. No, not of being here, I am only too glad to be here ; tired of myself, you know.’

‘Well, you must know best what sort of a self you’ve got to be tired of, to be sure ; but you won’t make it any better by staring up at the stars in that fashion !’

For answer, the girl pulled Martha on to a chair and sat in her lap, twining her arms about the old woman’s neck, and nestling against her withered cheek. ‘Everything is so lovely to-night ! Oh, Martha, dear, let’s go a little mad.’

‘There, for goodness’ sake, get off my lap ;’ with a faint pretence of pushing. ‘That comes of star-gazing—well, I never expected any good to come out of it, and I ought to have known better than to let you waste your time staring up there.’

‘But it does me good—indeed, indeed it does ; it is not that. Oh, Martha, I begin to wish I had been disappointed in love !’

‘Why ?’ looking down into the yearning eyes piercing the distance.

‘Because it would be much easier to bear than this. I cannot help thinking of him, and being glad he loved me—terribly glad—and it gets worse and worse. At first—before I left Fernside—I

thought I should soon get accustomed to think of him as her husband ; but I cannot, I cannot !'

' Her husband ! He's a married man, then ? '

' I don't know ; yes, I suppose so, by this time. He was engaged to my cousin, and I did not know it in time.'

' He was a pretty sort of a man ! '

' Don't blame him, Martha ; indeed, indeed, he could not help it ! '

Martha glanced down at the eloquent face, and in her heart of hearts thought that was quite possible.

' I let him see that I loved him, and then it all came out, and we had to give each other up.'

' And now you are sorry you did it, and want him back again ? '

' No ; I could bear never seeing him again, if only I might go on loving him. But I must not, and that's the trouble of it. Oh, Martha, dear, if you had only seen him !—no, seeing him would not have been enough. If you had but known him !' Then gently pressing down Martha's eyelids with the tips of her fingers, she shyly added, ' Don't you think Nugent is a beautiful name—would you mind whispering it just once, loud enough for me to hear ? '

' No, indeed ; I am not going to do anything so silly. What have I got to do with whispering

men's names, I should like to know.' For Martha had quite made up her mind that he was not to be taken into her favour. She took offence at his very name, which to Jean's dismay she insisted was 'outlandish, and not fit for a respectable man in a Christian country.'

Nevertheless, Martha lingered a little longer than usual over the 'tucking-up' process that night, and she found occasion to put the hair farther off Jean's face, as the latter was cosying down on her pillow; excusing herself by grumbling out that 'girls had no notion how to make themselves comfortable.' Jean fell asleep, half conscious that it was Martha's lips which last touched her cheek. Martha certainly looked very much ashamed of herself as she went to her own room that night.

'A pretty fool I'm making of myself!' she ejaculated, as she began her usual methodical process of preparing for rest. 'Why I am so taken up with a bit of a girl like her, I can't think. Where's the sense of it, when she might, like the rest, be off any day?' For she began to suspect that Jean would not be able to bear the life at Drayford House for any length of time better than others had done. The constant coming and going of the lady companions had hitherto affected her very little. Indeed, she had frequently found a grim sort of amusement in speculating how long

each was likely to remain. But the thought that Jean also might have to give up disturbed her terribly. How in the world would she be able to do without her? How could she go back to the old colourless life again? But she showed her anxiety in Martha fashion, by being a little crosser than usual to Jean. It was no use. From the first Jean had intuitively felt that she found favour in Martha's sight, and the sharp speeches and cross looks told for nothing in the balance against love. She was even daring enough to tax the old woman with loving her. Martha grumbled out a protest against being guilty of any such weakness. Miss Bell must think her very stupid, or she must think a fine deal of herself to suppose Martha was bound up in her. But, try as she might, she could not hide her anxiety at the change which she perceived to be creeping upon Jean.

‘If there’s anything you want, for goodness’ sake why can’t you say so?’ she would say crossly, after bringing all the little treats she could think of up to Jean in the bed-room, where the latter always found a cheerful fire burning to welcome her now. ‘Jane and Ann both say that you eat next to nothing now. You ain’t beginning to get tired of being here, are you?’ she would ask again and again.

‘ Oh, no, Martha, indeed, no ! If I wanted to leave here, I could not. I have nowhere to go to. But I do not want to leave. I like being here, if I can only please the Miss Drakes. I enjoy living with the beautiful things—almost too much.’

Martha shook her head a little doubtfully ; she could not understand enjoying things too much, if you went beyond meat and pudding, and Jean’s attempts to explain mystified her more than ever. Admiring things that made you cry was quite incomprehensible to Martha. It was as odd as saying she enjoyed going to church.

The Miss Drakes noticed nothing. They treated Jean with punctilious courtesy ; but took not the slightest interest in her. In truth, they were too much absorbed in their own thoughts to go beyond the merest business relationship with anyone. ‘ A pleasant morning for the garden, Miss Bell ;’ or, ‘ I hope you did not find it too cold to enjoy the exercise ;’ expressed more than all the interest they took in her. She could not help perceiving that her replies were never noticed if they were heard.

CHAPTER XXXII.

JEAN'S DISMISSAL.

ONE morning, after the customary greeting from the Miss Drakes and Jean's stereotyped reply, the latter forgot herself, and impulsively ejaculated—

‘What a pity it was necessary to make the wall at the bottom of the garden so very high. Even an ugly view would be better than so much wall, would it not, Miss Drake?’

There was dead silence for a moment or two. Miss Barbara sat frowning down at her mittens, and Miss Drake smiled. Then said the latter—

‘I daresay you could hardly conceive it possible that anyone could build that wall from malice: to shut out a beautiful view simply because another admired it, Miss Bell. Behind that wall there is one of the loveliest views of the winding river with fine trees and a terrace, that no one can now use.’

‘Oh, how *very* unkind. Why, it is quite cruel to shut out anything beautiful—wicked!’

‘I quite agree with you, Miss Bell.’

‘But cannot you have it taken down?’ asked Jean, looking eagerly at her.

‘Unfortunately I have not the power,’ said Miss Drake, ‘unless I outlive the present owner.’

‘How could anyone be so unkind!’ ejaculated Jean. ‘The idea of building that hateful wall, just to spite another!’

‘And yet that is but a very slight thing compared with the deeds of some people I could name,’ broke in Miss Barbara, with a very white face. ‘You would, I presume, hardly conceive it possible for one young girl to win the confidence of another, and then intercept her letters to her lover, and basely use them to get him sent out of the country, and so ruin her happiness for ever, and that from the meanest jealousy and envy. You would not consider that an honourable proceeding, I should think, Miss Bell.’

‘No, indeed!’ replied Jean. ‘I can hardly imagine anyone so wicked.’

‘Having gone so far, I must request your opinion upon another point, Miss Bell,’ said Miss Drake. ‘As you are so charmingly frank, probably you will not object to give your opinion about another person. What would you think of one who, by means of false representations, induced a father to disinherit an elder child, and

leave all he possessed to a younger one. I must beg you to be candid.'

'Well, I do not know which was the worst, really,' said blundering Jean. 'They must both have been as wicked as ever they could be, and there is not a pin to choose between them.'

There was silence again, and, now she had time to reflect, Jean began to feel terribly uncomfortable, a suspicion of the truth at length dawning upon her. 'Oh, dear! were they really talking about each other,' she thought, crimson with shame and terror, anxious to make some amends, yet not in the least knowing how to begin. Presently she gathered courage to glance towards them and try to read the expression of their faces—what it augured for her. She might as well have tried to find out what two blocks of marble were thinking. They were sitting with white set faces and downcast eyes, silent and motionless.

'Good gracious, if they have done the thing themselves they will never forgive me!' was poor Jean's mental ejaculation. 'But how could I suppose they were talking about each other in that way? What in the world can I say?' She nervously cleared her voice once or twice, but the words she wanted would not come. Not that it would have improved matters for her had she

been ever so fluent, since it was not in her nature to be able to say more than that she was sorry for having expressed her opinion. She had not yet learned the subtle art of using language to conceal her thoughts.

‘You would probably like to go to your room, Miss Bell?’ at length said Miss Barbara, with cold politeness.

‘Thank you, yes; I should, please,’ murmured Jean, glad enough to avail herself of the privilege. On reaching her room, she commenced proceedings with having a good cry; then sat pondering over what she had done, and the likelihood of its being looked over. ‘I would gladly ask them to forgive me; and I am very sorry to have said they were wicked; but I cannot say that I do not think it, if they really did such dreadful things,’ she murmured. ‘Whatever shall I do? Oh, Martha, I am so glad you have come!’ The old woman entered the room with a very grave, not to say angry face.

‘I thought you didn’t want to leave here?’

‘Have I got to go, then, Martha?’ asked Jean, with a white face. ‘Is that note for me?’

‘What have you done? They’re worse than I’ve ever known them before?’

‘They told me such dreadful things, and I did not think they could be talking about each other

like that. How *could* I suppose they had been so wicked ?'

‘What did you say?’

‘I said that the people who had done such dreadful things were both as wicked as ever they could be.’

‘You said that?’ said Martha, with a chuckle.
‘You told ‘em that to their faces?’

‘Yes, I did; and it is no use being angry with me, Martha, for I can’t help it now. And I really did mean it, although I’m sorry to have offended the Miss Drakes. Oh, Martha, you are not laughing?’

Martha was laughing. She had been learning to smile ever since Jean’s arrival at Drayford House, and now the smile suddenly blossomed into a laugh—almost as hearty as other people’s.

Jean was reading her note. ‘Miss Barbara Drake presents her compliments to Miss Bell, and begs to state that after that young lady’s *extraordinary* remarks, the only thing that can be done is to enclose the amount of a quarter’s salary, 10*l.*, and request her to quit Drayford House at her *earliest convenience*. She will doubtless recollect that there was no agreement entered into respecting notice on either side. If Miss Bell would like luncheon or refreshment of any kind before her departure, she is begged to order it to

be brought to her room, and she will find the servants ready to give any assistance that may be required in the way of packing her wardrobe, ordering a fly, &c. In wishing her well, Miss Barbara Drake feels it incumbent on her to add that she is *extremely* disappointed in Miss Bell, and fears that she has greatly overrated her capabilities to act as companion.'

'I've got to go, Martha,' said Jean, letting the note fall into her lap, and gazing blankly up into the old woman's face.

'Where are you going to? I thought you told me you had no place to go to?'

'I mean no home. Mrs. Brice will let me lodge with her again till I find another situation, I daresay. Kind Mrs. Brice, I have told you about, where I was before I came here, you know.'

Martha was silent a few minutes, and then said a little roughly, 'What do you say to my coming with you?'

'To lodge at Mrs. Brice's, do you mean?' asked Jean, quite bewildered at the proposition.

'Do you know enough music, and all the rest of it, to be able to teach?' asked Martha, a little irrelevantly, as it seemed.

'Yes; I was to have been a governess; but—.'

'I have saved enough to buy me a tidy

annuity, and I'm beginning to think I should like to have a little home of my own. What do you say to my taking a cottage in some pretty place, and you and me living together? You could get some teaching to do in the mornings perhaps, to employ your time.'

'Oh, Martha, how happy we should be! Do you really mean it?' ejaculated Jean, quite dazzled by the prospect. Then she remembered how long Martha had lived at Drayford House, and added a little doubtfully, 'But you would not like to leave the Miss Drakes, would you? Did not you tell me that you have lived with them forty years?'

'I have died with them forty years, girl. There, go on putting your things into the trunk, while I think a bit.' It would not be such a very easy thing to leave the old place after all; to say nothing of having to change her habits, which she would have to do in carrying out her suddenly devised scheme. She looked round at the old familiar objects, and faltered a little in her purpose, beginning to realise what the going away would involve. But she glanced at Jean, and was strong again. Suddenly a bright idea occurred to her, and she said with a determined face: 'Would you stop here if they would ask you?'

‘Yes; yes, of course, Martha; only too gladly.’

‘I shall be back in a few minutes.’ And Martha quitted the room, went downstairs, and straight to the drawing-room, where her mistresses were sitting.

She closed the door, advanced a little way into the room, and stood for a few moments silently looking at the two ladies, they returning her gaze with some surprise. What had happened to make Martha look like that, her face flushed, her lips quivering, and an expression they had never before seen in her eyes?

‘What is it, Martha?’

She looked intently from one to the other, ‘I’ve come to ask a favour of you, Miss Barbara; and you, Miss Drake?’

Each lady smiled kindly on the old woman. Martha was honoured and respected by her mistresses more than any living person. She had grown old in their service, knew the secret of the past, and each lady fancied she had a champion in Martha.

‘Do not doubt its being granted, Martha,’ said Miss Barbara, cheerfully.

‘I’ve come to ask you not turn away the only bit of sunshine that has come to this house for nigh upon forty year!’

Both ladies looked too much astonished to speak, and Martha went on more earnestly: 'Don't turn away the only bit of love that has come to us for many and many a long year? Don't do it!'

'Is it possible that you can be speaking in allusion to Miss Bell?'

'Ay.'

'Knowing what has taken place?'

'Ay.'

'Then I must tell you it is utterly impossible that my sister and I can look over Miss Bell's conduct.'

'Utterly impossible!' echoed Miss Drake.

'That's the first time that I have heard you two agree about any one thing for nigh upon forty year!'

'You *cannot* know what has occurred, Martha,' said the elder lady, tremulously.

'Will you let her stay?' persisted Martha.

'I am surprised and pained beyond measure at your asking such a thing, Martha;' returned the younger sister. 'If you knew what has taken place, I am sure you would not for a moment wish Miss Bell to stay.'

'She says she told you that whoever had done the things you talked about, was wicked; and she was right. God forgive me for not telling

you the same every day the last thirty years ! God forgive me for encouraging you in your wickedness. If I had told you the truth you could but have sent me away as you'll do now, and what the worse should I have been for going ? Do you think it's made me a better woman to learn to call your wickedness to each other only foolery ? Wouldn't it have been a thousand times better for me to have earned my wages more honestly than in fooling you ? I tell you there is such things as love, and truth, and beauty ; though you've done your best to keep 'em out of here. But it may do you some good even now to know that your vindictive wickedness has been seen plain enough by everybody that came nigh you ; though no one was true enough to tell you so ! '

Both sisters sat staring at the speaker with dilated eyes and ashen faces. But a peculiar expression was creeping over Miss Barbara's face, as though the icy mask which had so long covered it were giving way in all directions ; her hands, which had been extended as if to ward off Martha's blows, now tremblingly laced together. Then she rose, moved a few uncertain steps towards Martha, and with a low cry fell prone at her feet.

‘ Mistress ! Miss Barbara ! Oh, my dear mis-

tress, are you ill—can't you speak to me?' ejaculated Martha, in a terrified tone, kneeling down to lift the fragile, motionless figure in her arms; 'God forgive me, she is dying!'

'Dying!' exclaimed Miss Drake, springing forward with affrighted eyes. 'What do you mean, woman?' Kneeling down beside the prostrate form, and wringing her hands in the wildest agony. 'Dying! oh, Barbara, sister—little sister Bab, open your eyes? Speak one word to me, only one. It's Dorothy, dear; Dolly you used to love.'

There was great ringing of bells, and hasty feet running hither and thither, doctors hastily summoned, and then the stillness of death. Jean had packed her small belongings, and sat with her bonnet and cloak on awaiting Martha's return. Half-an-hour passed—an hour, and, getting a little impatient, wondering what had become of Martha, Jean opened the door and peeped into the gallery. One of the maids was on her way towards the backstairs.

'Is Martha engaged do you know, Lydia?'

'Don't you know what has happened, then, Miss Bell?'

'Happened? No.'

'There's been a great upset in the drawing-room, and Miss Barbara has had a sort of fit.'

The doctors call it paralysis ; but they think she will get over it now, though she was very nearly gone ; Miss Drake and Martha won't leave her a minute.'

The colour rushed to Jean's face, then faded again, leaving her paler than before as she listened, silent and conscience-stricken. It was she who had done all this mischief ! She must rid the house of her presence as quickly as possible.

' Lydia, would you oblige me—would anyone get me a fly to take me to the railway station ? Miss Drakes had arranged for me to leave here, and I should like to get away without giving farther trouble. I might go quietly down the back way, you know.'

' It had been so frequent an occurrence for the ladies in Jean's position to leave, that Lydia took her going as a matter of course. Thanking Jean for the little present slipped into her hand, and promising to manage it all quickly and quietly for her, Lydia went downstairs. In a short time she returned with the intelligence that a cab was waiting at the back entrance. They contrived to carry the trunk and bag quietly down between them, and, after entrusting a note to Lydia for Martha which she had written during the interval, Jean bade good-bye to Drayford House, and was driven off.

A little later Martha re-entered the room in which she had left Jean, to find only Lydia there, employed in putting things straight after the young girl's departure.

‘Where’s Miss Bell?’

‘Gone.’

‘Gone!’ echoed Martha.

‘Yes; didn’t you know. She went about a quarter of an hour ago. She told me to give this note to you, with her love.’

Martha sent Lydia away, then sat down, and opened her note with trembling fingers.

‘Good-bye, Martha dear, and please forgive me for the trouble I have given you. If the Miss Drakes will let you, thank them for their kindness to me, and say how very sorry I am for what has happened. I am sure it is better for you to stay with them. Please accept this little locket with some of my hair, from your sincerely attached, Jean Bell.’

‘We must have our sunshine back!’ ejaculated Martha, drawing a deep breath. ‘We can’t do without our sunshine now!’ Leaving her dear old mistresses was, of course, quite out of the question. Had not she and Miss Drake sobbed and cried in each other’s arms for joy, when the doctors gave a little hope; calling each other all the old fond foolish names of their girlhood again.

How thoroughly they enjoyed using all the tender epithets which had been so long frozen in their hearts over the invalid.

When, two days later, Barbara Drake, weak and bewildered, but restored to her senses again, opened her eyes, she tried to frown at the smiling face bending over her. But Dorothy's tears were pattering down upon her cheeks, and it was Dorothy's voice that exclaimed, 'Thank God, she knows us, Martha !'

Was it a dream—was she dreaming that she was young again—or was she really being called dear, darling, foolish, precious, old Bab? And was that stern old Martha pushing up her grey hair, and tumbling off her cap, and kissing Dorothy, whilst Dorothy kissed away vigorously in return, altogether forgetting the doctor's orders not to excite the patient? But Barbara Drake's greatest surprise of all was a streak of sunshine stretching across the bed.

She pointed to it with an appealing look up into Martha's face. She was answered by Dorothy.

' You have been ill nearly three days, darling Bab, and—and—' Dorothy broke down, and Martha took up the thread :

' They are pulling down the wall, Miss Bab dear ; as fast as ever the men can work.'

Barbara weakly uplifted her arms, and Dorothy tenderly drew her on to her bosom.

‘ You darling, stupid, old Dolly ! ’

‘ You absurd, precious, old Bab ! ’

‘ You’re neither on you any better than a couple of silly old babies ! ’ was Martha’s corollary ; tears of joy raining down her cheeks.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THOMAS BRICE'S DIPLOMACY.

‘MOTHER, if here ain’t Miss Bell come back !’ called out Sissy and Susy from the door step, when the cab drew up before the little shop.

Mrs. Brice put down her scrubbing brush, and hastened out to the door, drying her hands in her apron as she went, a hearty welcome in her face.

‘Can you let me have the little room again, Mrs. Brice ; is it still unlet ?’ anxiously enquired Jean, after the first greetings were over.

‘Yes ; to be sure and thankful too, Miss ; there isn’t much chance of letting here. Oh, dear, dear ; how glad I am to see your sweet face again ! I hope it does not seem unkind to say so when you’re coming to our poor place. Of course I ought to be sorry you was not comfortable enough to stop where you was.’

‘I was very comfortable ;’ absently murmured Jean. ‘I did not wish to leave, only I had to.’

In half an hour Jean was sitting with Mrs. Brice at tea again, with Sissy and Susy pressed close together bird fashion on their stool at her feet, in eager anticipation of a story. But Jean was silent and depressed at the thought of the uncertain future, and her own want of what Martha called 'tac' to guide her through the difficulties she was likely to encounter. She told Mrs. Brice very little about her experience at Drayford House; merely stating that she had been unfortunate enough to give offence. How that could be her humble friend could not at all understand; but she had the delicacy to abstain from asking questions. When her husband came in some time after, Jean had retired for the night, and she told him of the young girl's return, he looked so pleased as to astonish his wife. What made Thomas so very pleased about it?

'She won't be long with us, of course, Thomas,' she said, afraid of his depending too much upon the help Jean might be to them. 'It wouldn't be kind to her to wish it, but I was right glad to see her sweet face once again.'

'Ivy Lodge—Miss Bowles' didn't you say it was, mother?'

'Where Miss was at school? Yes, Thomas, but what—'

‘Don’t you ask questions about what you don’t understand. I know what I’m about.’

But Mrs. Brice had her doubts, and ventured a little farther. ‘I don’t think Miss wants Miss Bowles to know she’s here, Thomas. She said as much to me one day.’

‘I don’t suppose she does,’ was all that was vouchsafed by Mrs. Brice’s lord in reply.

The following morning Thomas Brice rang the bell at Ivy Lodge, and requested to see Miss Bowles. After some little difficulty, and the repeated assurance on his side that he brought no begging letter, nor subscription list of any kind, he was admitted to the front garden, and after a little delay to the presence of Miss Bowles.

He was sharply desired to state his business as shortly and concisely as possible; Miss Bowles’ time was valuable and it was against her rule to see strange people. In a low voice he mysteriously asked if she hadn’t once had a pupil called Miss Bell?

After a pause Miss Bowles admitted that a young lady of that name had resided for some time at Ivy Lodge. ‘Did she know that Miss Bell was hiding away from her friends?’ ‘No,’ more shortly and coldly. Miss Bowles knew nothing about Miss Bell’s proceedings since she had left

Ivy Lodge. Well, Thomas Brice could tell her that Miss Bell had run away from home; and if that young lady's rich relations wanted to know where she was, and were ready to give a reward for the intelligence, and pay the expenses that had been incurred (he had employed his imagination in making out a nice little bill for comforts supplied to Jean), he could put them in the way of finding her. 'It's clear to me, ma'am, that the young lady has got some notion in her head about getting her own living and being independent of her friends.'

Miss Bowles was not a little surprised at the communication, but she replied very cautiously. She did not consider it right to give him the address of Miss Bell's friends without their authority, but would write to them by that afternoon's post, and if in reply they consented to her doing so she would put him in communication with them, when he would obtain any reward that they might be inclined to give.

'If you call here at ten o'clock in the morning of the day after to-morrow, I may probably have received a reply to my letter, and if not you will be informed at the gate.' Then, to a servant who answered her summons, and in a not very carefully modulated voice, 'Show this man out and be careful to lock the gate.' And Miss Bowles turned away,

altogether ignoring Thomas Brice's awkward bow and 'Good morning, Miss.'

He departed very much impressed with Miss Bowles' high breeding.

That afternoon's post carried a letter to Mrs. Poynder, which she would have given nearly all she possessed to receive.

'A letter for mamma, Emma?' said Maude, taking it from the hand of the servant on her way to find her mistress. Maude went into the drawing-room where she read and re-read the letter thoughtfully through. She had just put it into the fire when her mother entered the room. 'News?' she eagerly ejaculated. 'Emma said there was a letter.'

'I wish you would try to overcome that absurd notion, mamma, fancying that every little tradesman's bill must be a letter from her. Why in the world cannot you be satisfied with what she told you herself. She must be the best judge of what she prefers to do. If she had changed her mind of course she would write, which she has not done,' with a little sigh of relief at being able to be so far true.

Mrs. Poynder wandered aimlessly out of the room again. She never rested long in one place now; and Maude sat down to reply to Miss Bowles' communication.

When Thomas Brice presented himself at the appointed time at Ivy Lodge, he was admitted to Miss Bowles' presence at once; she held an open letter in her hand.

' You were quite under a mistake, my good man, in supposing that Miss Bell's friends were at all desirous of communicating with her or to receive any information about her. I will read you the letter I have received upon the subject, suppressing names since the lady manifestly objects to be in any way troubled again upon the matter.'

" In reply to Miss Bowles' communication, Mrs. P. presents her compliments and thanks for the trouble that has been taken, and begs to state that she has not the slightest desire to know Jean Bell's present address, or to interfere with that person's future movements in any way whatever! Jean Bell has chosen to refuse the home charitably offered to her, affirming that she preferred taking her own way for the future; and Mrs. P. feels bound to add that she does not at all regret Jean Bell's decision, and very decidedly declines to have anything further to do with the matter."

In a fever of anxiety lest she should be drawn into anything derogatory to Ivy Lodge, where respectability had reigned supreme so many years, Miss Bowles hastened on her side to inform

Thomas Brice that she could not upon any account be again troubled upon the subject. Personally, she had no desire to see any more of Jean Bell. She had not a word to say to her disadvantage respecting the time she had been domiciled at Ivy Lodge, but she must altogether decline to be mixed up with anything which might have taken place since. Jean Bell had evidently offended her friends, and if she was desirous to reinstate herself in their favour the proper and only course was to write to them, and ask forgiveness for her error, whatever it might have been.'

Thomas Brice turned from the gate of Ivy Lodge a disappointed man; as angry and disappointed as a gold seeker who fancies he has come upon a rich vein of wealth, and finds it altogether valueless. Poor Mrs. Brice could not understand how it was that her husband so suddenly lost all interest in their lodger. Jean was less than ever a lady in his estimation. 'We never had a lodger that paid so well before, you know, Thomas,' would say his wife, when he made some surly remark about Jean.

'We must take care we don't lose by her in the long run,' he grumbled.

'I almost dread going to Miss Gilbert's again,' said Jean, in consultation with her friend. 'I am

afraid she will be so vexed with me about having left Miss Drake's, after stretching a point as she said to help me to get the situation.'

'Why not try another agent, Miss? There must be more than one, isn't there?'

It seemed a bright suggestion. After a moment's thought over it, Jean replied: 'I really think that would be a good plan. A young lady I met at Miss Gilbert's told me that another agent lives in — Street, which is not far from there.'

So it was decided, and Jean set forth the next morning in better spirits, quite relieved at not being obliged to go to the old place again. Poor Jean, she little supposed the welcome she would have received there. Old Martha sat waiting in Miss Gilbert's office morning after morning as patiently as she could in the hope of seeing Jean, for her dear mistresses were now quite as desirous as herself to get their sunshine back.

Jean found a lady quite as ready to transact business, if not quite so disposed to 'stretch a point,' as Miss Gilbert. After entering Jean's name upon the books, and receiving the fee, Mrs. Wyman went on pleasantly—

'I need not tell you that your want of reference is a serious drawback, Miss Bell.'

'No; I know it.'

‘Still there is a chance, you know,’ gathering up the five shillings.

Yes; Jean knew that too. But she went morning after morning waiting in vain for the ‘chance,’ whilst her small store of money was rapidly diminishing again. Mrs. Brice did her best to cheer and encourage her, but Jean was beginning to have an uncomfortable suspicion that the husband’s civility would only last until her purse was empty. She eked out her money as carefully as she could, trying to moderate her appetite, and buying the same coarse cheap food as the Brices lived upon; but she was drawing terribly near to her last sovereign.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

LADY ROUGHTON.

JEAN was beginning to grow quite weary of sitting day after day unnoticed in the agent's waiting-room—so hopeless, that when at last her 'chance' seemed to come she was completely taken by surprise. On her way out of the office one morning a lady happened to glance in Jean's direction. Her first glance was merely a passing one at the young girl sitting apart from others; then she noticed the hopeless expression in the pale thin face, and then something else! Her eyes dilated, fastening themselves upon Jean's face, and she stood as if spell-bound. Jean flushed up a little uncomfortably under such close scrutiny. The stranger murmured something that was meant for an apology, drew down her veil and passed on. But only so far as the door. As though irresistibly attracted to the vicinity again, she slowly returned, her eyes fixed in the same earnest way upon the young girl's face.

Jean looked her surprise, and the other said in a low uneven voice—

‘I beg your pardon; but—I thought I knew you. You are so — like someone I — once knew.’

Jean bowed with a slight little smile. No hope of anyone claiming acquaintance with her! She almost pitied the girl, whoever she might be, that was like her. The lady turned away and went into the inner room. She whispered a few words to Mrs. Wyman, then sank white and motionless into a chair. But she was presently able to make a faint apology for the trouble she was giving. She was not in very good health, and had ventured out earlier in the day than usual. Would Mrs. Wyman be good enough to ask the young lady to call upon her in Berkeley Square. ‘Or,’ she added hesitatingly, ‘possibly Miss—Bell would not mind driving home with me now. She is seeking some kind of engagement, did not you say, Mrs. Wyman?’

‘Yes, Lady Roughton,’ replied Mrs. Wyman; ‘but—’

‘Will you be good enough to introduce me to her?’ in a tone which, though gentle enough, was accustomed to be obeyed.

‘Will you come this way, Miss Bell? Lady Roughton wishes to speak to you.’

Jean slowly advanced, expecting it was only to go through the usual questioning with the usual results. Lady Roughton's eyes were downcast as she said in a low tremulous voice—

‘Mrs. Wyman tells me you are seeking an—engagement—of some kind—Miss Bell?’

‘Yes; I am hoping to find a situation as governess, Lady Roughton.’

Then, to fill up the pause which followed, Lady Roughton seemed incapable of speaking, Mrs. Wyman said to Jean, ‘This lady is requiring a companion. Did you not tell me that you have had one engagement of that kind, Miss Bell?’

‘Yes,’ said Jean. Then to save time and trouble, she added, ‘Does Lady Roughton know that I can offer no reference, Mrs. Wyman?’ Why should she give this gentle-looking woman the trouble to frame her excuses gracefully; unequal as she seemed to make the effort, thought Jean. ‘I am quite willing to take the customary polite speech for granted, and you need not look so anxious about it. What a dear sweet face you have!’

It was a very sweet face. Ill as she looked, there were the traces of great loveliness in Lady Roughton’s thin face. She was dressed with rich simplicity, though its fashion was a little too old for her age. Everything about her seemed to tell

of wealth, and utter carelessness, not to say scorn of it.

‘Would you mind accompanying me home now, Miss Bell?’ asked Lady Roughton, in the same low, nervous voice, and with averted eyes; though Mrs. Wyman noticed that they were turned upon Jean whenever Jean’s were turned from her.

‘Not in the least,’ said Jean; although in some surprise at the request after her statement about having no reference. ‘It is not very far, perhaps?’

‘Only to Berkeley Square. I am not very strong to-day, and I could speak to you better—after a little rest at home—Miss Bell, if you do not mind the trouble.’

‘Oh, no; of course not, Lady Roughton,’ returned Jean, mentally adding, ‘But I wish you had understood at once about the reference.’ Then, as Lady Roughton weakly rose from her seat, ‘May I offer you my arm, I fear you have not quite recovered.’ Lady Roughton seemed glad to avail herself of the support.

‘I do not lean too heavily, I hope,’ she murmured, glancing a moment up into the girl’s face, as her fingers closed round the firm round arm.

‘Oh no, indeed! Pray do not mind leaning, I am a very strong girl.’ It was but a few steps

to the carriage, but it took some time to get to it.

Lady Roughton spoke no word to her companion during the short drive ; lying back with closed eyes, white and still, amongst the cushions.

‘Can there be any chance for me !’ wondered Jean. But she was afraid to indulge a hope. ‘After she has talked to me it will be the same as the others ; very kind, very sorry, but—“Good morning, Miss Bell.” She looks so nice too ; and it is always harder to bear from the nice ones !’

In her excitement Jean did not notice the exterior of the house they stopped at, but as soon as she got into the entrance hall, she saw that the owner must be rich as well as titled. At a whispered word from his mistress, one of the tall footmen threw open a door to the left of the hall, and ushered Jean into a noble-looking dining-room, begging her to wait there for a few minutes.

Jean was alone fifteen or twenty minutes ; but for her watch she would have thought it was at least an hour. ‘And all for nothing !’ she murmured. ‘This does not look a house that could do without references !’ gazing around her. ‘I should not think anything without a character ever got in here.’

A well-mannered, pleasant-looking lady’s maid, attired in a neat fitting black silk dress

and pretty lace cap, opened the door, and said respectfully,

‘ My mistress is extremely sorry to have kept you so long waiting, ma’am. She has had one of her bad attacks, but will be glad to see you now if you will kindly come to her own room.’

Jean followed the maid up the thickly-carpeted stairs, past a grand suite of drawing-rooms, on the first floor, to an exquisitely-furnished boudoir. Lady Roughton was lying back in a low chair near the fire. With a faint smile she signed to Jean to take a seat by her side.

‘ You need not wait, Floyd.’

The maid placed a small table, upon which were some essences, a fan-handscreen, &c., and then noiselessly quitted the room. But when they were left alone, to Jean’s great surprise, her companion seemed in no haste to commence a conversation. If that could have been possible, Jean would almost have fancied that she seemed embarrassed. Presently she ventured to say, ‘ I hope you are feeling better, Lady Roughton ? ’

‘ Thank you, yes.’ Then with downcast eyes, she added : ‘ Mrs. Wyman told me that your name is Bell—Jean Bell—was she right ? ’

‘ Yes ; that is my name, the only one I have now.’

‘ Now ? You are too young to be married.

How came you to change your name, what other had you ?'

'I would rather not say, if you will excuse me, Lady Roughton,' replied poor Jean.

'You must tell me !' ejaculated Lady Roughton, bending eagerly forward, 'I—I beg of you to tell me !'

Jean looked surprised. What did her other name matter to Lady Roughton ? Then she repeated hesitatingly, 'I would rather not say.'

'Do not be afraid to confide in *me*,' pleaded the elder woman ; 'I am not asking from vulgar motives. Indeed, you may trust to me.'

'I am sure I am not a bit afraid of that,' returned Jean. 'I feel as though I could tell you anything, Lady Roughton. My father's name was Raymond, and—'

'What ! Raymond—where did he live—what was his Christian name ?' Lady Roughton was staring at Jean now with wildly dilating eyes.

'He lived in India, and his name was Oliver Raymond,' promptly replied Jean. Then, terrified at the effect of her words, she exclaimed, 'Oh, Lady Roughton, did you know my father ?'

'I—no—no.'

'You are ill !' and Jean sprang towards the bell.

'No ; do not ring.'

‘But what can I do?’ Jean caught up some eau de Cologne, ‘May I?’

A faint smile (‘Ah, what a smile!’ thought Jean) as she softly bathed the invalid’s temples. Presently the face grew a little less ashen white, and two or three great tears rolled from beneath the down-cast lids.

‘Are you feeling a little better, Lady Roughton?’ asked Jean, kneeling down before her, and chafing the cold hands between her own warm palms.

Lady Roughton bent her head.

‘I am so very, very sorry! You had not recovered sufficiently to see me, had you?’

‘Will you put thirty drops from that smallest bottle into the glass with some water for me?’

Jean carefully measured out the required quantity; the other’s eyes greedily devouring her face the while, and gave the glass into the trembling hands. Then after a few moments’ silence she asked,

‘Had I not better come another time, Lady Roughton?’

‘Do not go, I shall be able to speak to you presently, after resting awhile. You will find some books on that table.’

Jean took one and sat down by the window,

but her anxiety prevented her taking in the sense of what her eyes rested upon. It seemed an age before the invalid spoke again to her. Then she said gently, 'Miss Raymond !'

Jean put down the book, and went towards her.

'I am very sorry, but I am afraid I must give up the idea of your coming to live with me. But I must not lose sight of you—you must promise to—to—'

'Do not let it distress you, Lady Roughton. I know what you mean, only you are so kind that you do not like saying it. But I had not any hope from the first, so I am not disappointed—not much. I cannot expect to get any really good engagement without being able to give any reference, certainly not such a home as this. Everybody tells me that there is only the very smallest chance of my getting anything.'

'Do they—do they tell you that? Are you sure?' eagerly.

'Yes,' returned Jean, 'I have seen numbers of ladies who were afraid to engage me on that account. Some quite as kind and sorry for me as yourself.'

Lady Roughton was looking anything but sympathetic now, almost as though she were pleased, thought wondering Jean.

‘But you are not without friends? Excuse me, had your father no relations?’

‘Yes, but they did not care much for me after he died, and something came out about my mother. That was one cause, and there was another which I will not trouble you about.’

‘Do you mean to tell me that you are alone in the world, without friends or money?’

‘I have one friend, who is the carpenter’s wife where I am lodging, and I have only one pound fourteen and sixpence in the world,’ replied Jean a little brusquely. Why did the other seemed so pleased about her friendlessness after declining to engage her? Was she really as kind as she had first appeared to be?’ ‘Good morning, Lady Roughton; I hope you will soon be better.’

‘Wait.’

Lady Roughton sat with her hands tightly clasped, and Jean saw that her lips were moving. Then she looked up, and with the tears streaming down her face, held out her hand to Jean.

‘Stay with me.’

Jean was a little bewildered. ‘Come to live here, do you mean, Lady Roughton?’

The latter bowed her head.

‘Do you really wish it?’ questioned Jean, unable to understand why the other had altered her mind.

Lady Roughton's eyes fell beneath the girl's gaze, and she replied in a low broken voice, 'You say that you are poor and friendless, and would not readily find a home?'

'Yes.'

'Then come here.'

'Oh, Lady Roughton, you will take me because of it! How good of you—how very good! What a fortunate girl——'

'Hush! Can you send for your luggage, or must you go for it?'

'I must go to say good-bye to my dear, kind Mrs. Brice, who has been like a good mother to me. And though they are so poor that they will terribly miss my few shillings a week, she will rejoice to hear of my good fortune.'

'God bless her for her goodness to—to the friendless! Will you give this to her from me?' taking a note from an emblazoned velvet case on the table, and putting it into Jean's hand.

The latter's eyes opened wide. 'Ten pounds!' she ejaculated, in great astonishment.

'I have so much more money than I want,' a little confusedly and apologetically explained Lady Roughton, 'and I have not other people's opportunities for going amongst the poor.' Then, seeing that Jean could not get over the surprise, she added, 'But perhaps ten pounds *is* too much to

give at one time. Will you give her these five sovereigns?’

‘How very kind! She will indeed be grateful.’

‘I will order the carriage, and you will not stay longer than you can help, will you?’ said Lady Roughton, now apparently more reluctant to let Jean go than she had previously been to let her remain.

‘I will be as quick as I can; but do not order the carriage, Lady Roughton. It could hardly get into our street, and Sissy and Susy, Mrs. Brice’s little girls, to whom I have been accustomed to tell fairy tales, would fancy I had turned out to be a fairy myself,’ laughed Jean.

Lady Roughton touched a bell by her side, and said to the maid who obeyed the summons, ‘Tell one of the men to get a cab for Miss Bell, Floyd, and send the housekeeper to speak to me about a room. Miss Bell is coming to stay with me.’

‘Was ever such good fortune!’ thought happy Jean, as she was being rapidly driven towards Mrs. Brice’s. The latter was unfeignedly glad to hear of her dear Miss Bell’s good fortune, and when the five pounds were put into her hands was quite overcome with joy, sobbing out all sorts of grateful messages to the kind lady.

‘Five pounds! Why it was quite a fortune! There would be the taxes, and the rent, and every-

thing set straight for ever so long ! And it's all come through you, Miss Bell, dear ! Every bit of happiness I've had for many a long year has come through you !'

With Mrs. Brice's help Jean's small wardrobe was soon packed in the trunk.

' It is not much of a good-bye, this time, you know,' said Jean, giving her friend a last kiss on the doorstep. ' I shall not be so far away as before, and will come to see you as often as ever I can. Good-bye, baby dear. Be kind to mother, Sissy and Susy,' nodding and smiling out of the cab window at them until it turned the corner of the street.

CHAPTER XXXV.

WONDERLAND.

THE tall footman looked superciliously down at the battered little trunk and bag which constituted the new comer's luggage. Jean was the first lady companion that had arrived there, but Robert came to the conclusion that companions must be a 'poor lot' if they hadn't got more belonging to them than had this one.

Jean was conducted to a large cheerful, luxuriously-furnished bedroom. 'I shall begin to think I have found a fairy godmother in real earnest at last,' was her mental ejaculation, as she noted the pretty work and writing tables, well chosen little collection of books, &c.

Then Floyd tapped at the door, and came in to offer her services in such a matter-of-course, smiling way. Jean did not know that she had just had ten pounds a year added to her wages for those especial smiles. She shook out Jean's best dress, and although the crape was getting a little rusty, rightly estimated its original value.

‘Ten pounds, if a penny,’ thought Floyd, with artistic appreciation. ‘Cambric and—yes, real Valenciennes. If it is all getting a little worn, it’s been made for a lady in the beginning; I can see that with half an eye, and it won’t be like demeaning one’s self to do for one of the common people.’ For Floyd prided herself upon not having yet accepted service with common people, and had made a mental reservation in accepting the ten pounds. If the new comer should not come up to Floyd’s standard of what a lady should be, Lady Roughton must be respectfully but firmly informed that not for twice the sum offered could Floyd wait upon her. But Jean and her belongings, few as they were, satisfied Floyd.

‘Lady Roughton thought you might probably prefer sitting here sometimes to being in the drawing-rooms, and bade me say that it shall be better arranged as soon as possible—when she knows what you would like.’

‘Lady Roughton is very kind, but I do not think it can be better,’ said Jean.

‘It is a cheerful room, is it not, ma’am, with its look over the square. It has the same view as her ladyship’s sitting-room, which opens into it by that door. She thought you would feel less

lonely near to her. She very rarely uses the drawing-rooms ; her health does not admit of receiving company, and Sir Arthur always dines at his club and is out in the evenings now.'

'Sir Arthur—Lady Roughton's husband?' Jean had not given a thought to the possibility of there being a husband.

'Yes, ma'am. Didn't you know her ladyship is married?'

'It did not occur to me.'

'My mistress hopes you will be able to amuse yourself, ma'am. This is not one of her best days, and going out has made her rather worse, I think. She bade me tell you that she has ordered dinner to be prepared by five o'clock, as she thought you might prefer that hour to-day, and begs you will excuse her until the evening, when she may be better for the rest she is taking.'

Floyd would have been in the wildest astonishment could she have known how her mistress was resting at that moment. Lady Roughton was now pacing the room with hurried uneven steps, wildly wringing her hands and now casting herself down on to the ground in the utter abandonment of shame and misery.

At five o'clock Jean was informed that dinner was on the table, and Floyd conducted her to the hall,

where a footman took charge of her, ushering her into the great dining-room with official solemnity.

Dinner was elaborately laid for one, and the footman stationed himself behind her chair.

‘Oh, dear!’ thought Jean, with a glance at the elaborate preparations, and the huge figure in livery.

‘If, as Mrs. Floyd says, there’s to be extra pay, well and good. I’ll bring myself down to it for a time,’ thought Robert. But the effort it cost him was very apparent indeed. His languid way of offering anything might have suggested extreme physical weakness, had there been no other cause for his feeling inconvenienced by its weight. Fortunately for herself Jean was more hungry than nervous, and she partook of the dainty dishes presented to her with some enjoyment, Hercules notwithstanding. He had just placed dessert (Lady Roughton had given orders for Miss Bell to be treated as an honoured guest) upon the table, and to her great relief quitted the room, when she heard sounds of an arrival. The hall-door was opened and shut, a quick tread sounded outside; the door of the room in which she sat was unceremoniously flung open, and a gentleman entered with his hat on, and a sheaf of papers in his hand. ‘The brougham at seven, Robert.’ His eyes fell upon Jean, and he stood

for a moment or two gazing at her in dumb amazement. Blushing deeply, she half rose from her seat, not knowing what to say or do. He took off his hat, murmured an apology, and left the room again. A minute afterwards he re-entered.

‘I must introduce myself, if you will allow me, Miss Bell !’

‘You are Sir Arthur ?’ she said, bowing.

‘Yes. Pray do not let me disturb you. I only returned to apologise for my abruptness just now.’

‘I had finished,’ she said, moving towards the door, eager to make her escape as quickly as possible.

He held open the door for her, with as grand a bow as he would make to a duchess ! thought Robert, who from his standpoint in the hall had observed his master’s courtesy.

‘Poor Mary !’ mused Sir Arthur. ‘I hoped she meant to engage some useful middle-aged person ! She can hardly expect a girl like that to settle down to the life here. It was not wise to let Miss Bell come if she herself desired it.’

Sir Arthur Roughton was a tall, slightly built, distinguished-looking man, somewhat under forty years of age; his too delicately and sharply defined features typifying race—race slightly degenerated—rather than strength. Almost the

same might be said of his mental qualities. Clear and incisive as it was, his intellect wanted breadth. But if his highest conceptions were not grand, his lowest were not vile. His dependants spoke of him with respect. ‘He was high, was Sir Arthur, and you had to be careful—it didn’t do to say a word too many in answering him.’ But though he was never familiar with dependants, those who served him faithfully found him considerate, and even anxious for their well-being, and all were proud of him as one of the right sort—‘a born gentleman.’

Since Lady Roughton had become a confirmed invalid and had had her separate apartments, he was as scrupulously attentive, and regardful of her comfort, as he had ever been. She was supposed to be a little older than her husband—she looked years older—but that might be attributed to ill health and a temperament which appeared to be a not naturally cheerful one. She never went into society nor received any visitors, leading a silent, solitary life in her own suite of rooms.

Until succeeding to the baronetcy and large estates, which fell to him in consequence of a succession of unexpected deaths in the family, it was rumoured that Sir Arthur had not been a rich man, and had always lived abroad. This was supposed to account for the fact of Lady Roughton

having no friends in England. When about twenty, a subaltern with his regiment in India, Sir Arthur Roughton had suddenly sold out of the army, and left the country. After which he was only heard of at rare intervals by his friends, living upon his small income at different continental cities, and keeping out of the way of English residents or visitors. Even after his succession to the estates he remained abroad, leaving the management of them to agents for nearly three years. But a few months previously to this date, he and Lady Roughton had suddenly arrived at Roughton Park, and Sir Arthur had assumed the duties and responsibilities of his position. He had been readily welcomed by men of his class. His means and position were too influential in the county he represented for him to be ignored, had he been less desirable than he was as a companion ; but it came to be understood by their wives that Lady Roughton's health did not permit of paying or receiving visits, and civilities were exchanged upon cardboard to the content of all parties. It was considered odd that no one knew anything about the antecedents of the wife ; ' but no doubt Lady Roughton had adopted the wisest course under the circumstances, and her seclusion prevented many unpleasant little complications which might otherwise have arisen,' said society. They

had now taken up their permanent residence in town, that Lady Roughton might have the benefit of being near the best physicians, though Sir Arthur had been informed that their greatest skill could only smooth her way to the grave. It was the opinion of many of those about her that Lady Roughton did not sufficiently appreciate the luxuries with which she was surrounded. It was not suffering which caused her to be so regardless of her surroundings. She suffered very little as a rule, appearing to fade gently day by day, and some of the medical men consulted believed that she might at any rate prolong her life if she cared to do so. But she very evidently did not desire it. All their suggestions were disregarded, she took an airing less and less frequently, and declined to be amused in any way, seeming to take not the slightest interest in anybody or anything. It had been only to satisfy her husband, to whom the doctors had suggested the advisability of her having a cheerful lady companion, that she made an effort and paid a visit to the agent's that day. She would just set his mind at rest by going, but she had quite made up her mind beforehand not to find any lady who would suit her. The very idea of a companion was intolerable to her. Before paying his accustomed visit that afternoon (Sir Arthur spent half

an hour in his wife's room every day), he sent to know if she would receive him.

'Not one of your best days I fear, Mary,' bending down to give the customary kiss upon her brow, but not at all disturbed at finding a handscreen in the way. The kiss had been offered, and that was enough. Whatever he had once been, Sir Arthur Roughton was not very *exigeant* in the matter of kisses now. He seated himself and calmly went on, 'You have soon succeeded in finding a companion. I was so astonished that I was abrupt to Miss Bell when I found her in the dining-room just now. But I enquired of Robert, and made the *amende* as well as I could.'

'I—she was waiting at the office, and—when I found she was only staying in lodgings, I thought it just as well she should come here at once,' replied Lady Roughton, speaking mechanically, her eyes fastened upon the screen in her hand.

'Oh, of course; I hope you will find her companionable. I do not know much about lady companions: but would not you have found an older and more experienced woman more useful to you, Mary? Is not Miss Bell too young for such an office?'

'She did not think so.'

'But was it quite wise to allow her to decide? This is hardly the place for a young girl like—'

A faint cry from Lady Roughton. The colour deepened in her husband's face. 'Mary! Surely you cannot think me capable of—of meaning—'

'No, I ought to know you are not capable of anything ungenerous. I *do* know it.' Then she presently added, in a low quivering voice, 'But I feel that it was not right to—to let her come. I was miserably, selfishly weak!'

'No, no; do not say that. We must hope she will be induced to stay, and do our best to make things as cheerful as we can for her. It will certainly be pleasant to see her about the house. She is very nice-looking—something, the turn of her head or expression of the eyes—I hardly know what, reminded me a little of yourself at her age. Anyhow, she looks very refined and more un-hackneyed than one expects a companion by profession to be. She is quite a gentlewoman, though; only just emerged from the school-room, I presume. Although she was a little nervous at my sudden irruption, it was not the nervousness of ill-breeding. Intelligent, too; if her face speaks truly.'

He spoke at length, desirous to make his wife satisfied with what she had done, and openly as an honourable man can be open in his admiration of a beautiful woman.

‘I am glad you approve of Miss Bell,’ gently replied his wife.

‘I hope you made a liberal arrangement with her, Mary? A few pounds more or less are of no importance, you know. What salary did you offer—a hundred?’

‘I forgot. I have not mentioned anything about salary yet.’

‘Not mentioned salary! And did not she?’

‘She forgot, too, I suppose.’

‘Not a very business-like beginning,’ he said, smilingly. ‘She certainly does not give you the idea of being accustomed to bargain. But she may safely depend upon you to do what is right.’

In truth, Lady Roughton really had forgotten the business part of the question, and, oddly enough, this remembrance that it had to be done was painful to her; her husband’s *carte blanche* notwithstanding. It seemed as though she suddenly realised some new difficulty.

When Jean was seated with Lady Roughton that evening, and had, in the fulness of her heart, tried to give some expression to her thankfulness for her good fortune, the other slowly and hesitatingly approached the subject.

‘There was no mention made of—of remuneration between us this morning, Miss Bell. I do

not know what you have been in the habit of receiving ?'

' Mine have been such funny habits, Lady Roughton,' smilingly replied Jean. ' I have had only one situation, and that lasted but a few weeks.'

Then, feeling that she ought not to expect such munificent pay as forty pounds a year, she did not name the sum Miss Drakes had agreed to give; adding, ' I shall be satisfied with very little.'

' I presume you only want sufficient to—to procure clothes, and so forth ? ' which certainly appeared a little mean on Lady Roughton's side, after her husband's hint about being liberal, if she had not another and deeper motive for not wishing to give Jean much in the way of salary. It was in such contrast with her ready offer of ten pounds for Mrs. Brice, too.

' That is all,' cheerfully returned Jean.

' And you do not care about purchasing your own things, I dare say; so that you have what you require ? '

' Oh, no ; not in the least ! I have not been accustomed to buy my own clothes, and I should not know what things ought to cost, Lady Roughton. I have never even bought myself a pair of gloves.'

‘Then you will consent, perhaps, to accept my promise that you shall have everything a gentlewoman could require, without my giving you any fixed sum, Miss Bell?’

‘Quite,’ said Jean.

‘I am a little peculiar, perhaps, in—in not liking to give anything in the way of fixed payment to you—to one in your position,’ hesitated Lady Roughton, by way of explanation.

‘I am quite willing to leave everything to you, Lady Roughton,’ said Jean, though a little astonished, too. Had she met with another eccentric person? Well, perhaps it was only eccentric people who wanted companions. And, really, what a home she had found. It would be quite wicked not to be satisfied. Though this was not so full of romance as Drayford House, apparently not containing so many ghosts of the past, it was more luxurious and comfortable.

Lady Roughton thought a little, then made another attempt at explanation. It was her whim to provide for her companion out of her own income, and she could do that more easily if Miss Bell would let her spend it in her own way, repeating that the latter would find herself furnished with all she needed. Jean heartily acquiesced, begging her to say no more about the matter, but do just as she pleased. Afterwards, Lady Roughton

lay back in her chair holding a screen before her face, and speaking very little.

Jean was just sufficiently fatigued after her day's excitement to enjoy dreaming away the evening in a low cosy by the fire. With the understanding that her present employer was an invalid, there was not the same discomfort in silence which there had been with the Miss Drakes.

But twice or thrice, when she ventured to steal a glance in that direction, she met Lady Roughton's eyes fixed upon her with an expression which greatly puzzled her. They were withdrawn in an instant, a faint colour tinging the thin cheeks. 'She is wondering what sort of a girl I really am,' thought Jean. 'I wish she would ask questions, and let me tell her all about myself, and then she would know the worst. How funny to be sitting in state here, amongst all this grandeur, when only last night I was mending the children's socks in dear Mrs. Brice's little parlour.'

But Jean was dismissed at ten o'clock with a quiet good-night, and sent to her room believing herself as much an enigma to Lady Roughton as the latter was to her. 'She seems a little distant and cold in her manner,' thought Jean, 'and yet there is a something. I feel sure she can be very kind sometimes—more than kind. Her eyes had such a tender, loving look in them when she

fancied I was not looking.' She awoke in the night half conscious that someone was in the room hovering about her bed-side, and once it seemed as though lips were touching her hand which lay outside the coverlid. But she soon persuaded herself that she must have been dreaming, and fell into healthy slumber again.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

‘SO NEAR AND YET SO FAR.’

FLOYD came into Jean’s room in the morning to offer her services, and the latter did not suffer in her estimation by declining them. If she had been only half a lady she would have accepted, thought Floyd. She informed Jean that her mistress took breakfast in her own room, and thought that perhaps Miss Bell would like to take hers with Sir Arthur at half-past nine.

‘It would have been all the pleasanter without Sir Arthur,’ thought Jean with a wry face. ‘But I suppose I have to be his companion when Lady Roughton does not want me, so I must do my best to be agreeable.’

She was a great deal relieved to find that the effort was not required. After a few polite words, which did not tax her powers in the way of reply, his attention became absorbed by the numerous letters, and pamphlets, and notices which had arrived by the morning’s post. Nevertheless, he

was between while conscious that it was a pleasant contrast to the daily monotony of the meal to have Jean sitting there, so fresh and bright, attending to his wants. How much grace and colour her girlish beauty lent to the dull room, and how simple and free from anything like affectation, was her bearing !

‘ It is very pleasant to have a lady here, Miss Bell,’ he said, when at length, to her great relief, he had finished his last cup of coffee, and she rose from the table. ‘ My poor wife has not been able to come down so long ; I feel quite obliged to you for giving me my coffee.’

‘ I thought I had to,’ said Jean.

‘ I trust no one gave you that impression,’ he replied, courteously.

‘ Oh, no ; but I haven’t been much used to being a companion, and I thought perhaps I was expected to be yours when Lady Roughton did not require my services.’

He looked, and for the moment was, too utterly astonished to be able to reply. But there she was with her clear, honest, brown eyes, looking straight up into his face, and he had to say something. So he replied, as gravely as he could, ‘ You will not be taxed in that way, Miss Bell, beyond giving me my coffee, if you do not mind doing so in the morning. I hope you will find

some congenial amusement here to wile away your leisure. If you read, my library is at your service, and my wife is a subscriber for the new works. There are two or three pianos about the place, and I will have a harp brought up from Roughton. Then I hope you will prevail upon Lady Roughton to take drives with you, or, if not, remember there is a carriage always at your service. Except in the square, of which the servants will give you the key, or when you drive to the Gardens, walking exercise will not be advisable, I suppose?’

Jean murmured her gratitude. ‘I shall have too many pleasures,’ she thought, as she went upstairs, staying a few minutes to look at the suite of beautifully furnished drawing-rooms, which no one used, on her way. ‘It would be strange, indeed, if I could not amuse myself here!’ she said, as she took note of the numerous aids around her. Then her pretty room, with its cheerful view of the square, and prettily laid-out centre garden, which was to be her exercise ground. ‘And books and music, too; oh, yes, indeed! I think we shall be able to amuse ourselves. And you are to be my writing table, I suppose, my dear; well, I will write letters to myself rather than not use you. Or, what do you think of my opening a correspondence between my pet authors and the fairies,

and making these pigeon-holes their post-office ? We shall find out all sorts of things that way, you know.'

Floyd tapped at the door ; 'Lady Roughton's compliments, and she will be very pleased to see you when you are disengaged, Miss Bell.'

Jean went at once into the next room. She was received with a faint, though kindly, smile by Lady Roughton.

'Yes ; I am better, thank you. I hope you slept well, and liked your room, Miss Bell ?'

'Yes ; indeed, Lady Roughton, everything is so much nicer than I could hope for.'

The latter glanced a moment at the bright face, so pure and fresh looking in the morning light, and then cast down her eyes. Presently, she said in a low, hesitating voice : 'This right hand gets a little cold and numb, sometimes ; would you mind rubbing it for me ?'

Jean knelt down, and tenderly took the other's hand between her own warm, young palms, softly rubbing it.

The invalid lay back in her chair, white and still.

'Am I doing it right—gently enough—do my hands feel warm ?' asked Jean, looking up into the other's face. 'It is such a pleasure to be able to do something for you, Lady Roughton.'

‘Hush!’ then with an effort, she added, ‘You must not spoil me, Miss Bell, and I must not allow you to make a nurse of yourself,’ with a still greater effort withdrawing her hand.

‘I hope you will allow me to be a nurse or anything else I am capable of being,’ earnestly replied Jean. ‘And if I am remiss in anything I ought to do, I hope you will tell me. I was trained to be a governess.’

‘Were you? I do not wish to appear curious or impertinent, Miss Bell, but I am sure that there cannot be anything in your past which you need mind being known, and I should be so pleased to know more about you—how it was you found yourself left friendless and alone in the world, if you do not object to tell me?’

‘Oh, no; not a bit! Indeed, I would rather you knew all about me.’

‘Sit here, child.’

‘I would rather be here, please,’ said Jean, seating herself on a stool at the other’s feet, she added, musingly: ‘and I am beginning to have quite a story now. Would you mind my not telling you the surname of my aunt and cousins, unless it slips out, Lady Roughton? They might not now like its being known that I belong to them.’

‘Suppress whatever you please,’ returned the elder lady, with a smile.

‘Well, there is only one thing which I need suppress about myself, and you would not care to hear that,’ said Jean, thinking of Nugent Orme. ‘Where shall I begin? My story had not much of a beginning until I was over sixteen. I am only a little over seventeen now. You would not think that, would you? I feel as though I had lived quite a long life, since I left school. I shall soon be quite an experienced person.’

‘Not just yet, I think,’ returned her ladyship, looking down with a tender smile, her hand going tremblingly out to the girl’s bent head, ‘although I perceive you are beginning to give up girlish vanities. Do you always wear your hair dressed in this simple fashion?’ her hand touching the great gold-brown twists and lingering there.

‘Yes, I shall always wear it so now. I hope you do not mind, Lady Roughton?’

‘Not at all; it is very much more becoming than the present fashion, although I suppose that is not your reason for wearing it so. Probably some one you cared for liked to see it so dressed?’ bending down a little lower to get a better view of the girl’s face, and noting the soft rosy flush which covered it.

‘Yes,’ said Jean, consciously.

‘Then I think there must be something about love in your story ; is not there ?’ curiously.

‘That is the very part I did not mean to tell,’ said Jean. ‘But it would not be a good story, not a grown-up story, without some love in it—would it ?’

‘I suppose not,’ with a bitter sigh. ‘But I must not interrupt you again. Your story dates from about a year ago ?’

‘In one way it does. Do you know, I would endure what I have since over and over again rather than go back to the old school life. It was so terrible, Lady Roughton !’

‘Why ?’

‘Because there was no love in it ; nobody cared for me. I was not like other girls ; everybody seemed to think that there was something wrong about me, so they did not care to have me for a friend. I always believed, and so did the other pupils, that Miss Bowles took me out of charity, but I know now that papa did pay for me. So I grew up not nice ; I was so stupid about things that everybody else knew. I had never seen a home, and the girls used to laugh at me for my absurd fancies about what it was like. I never remember to have had a kiss from anybody in my life until I left school and went to Aunt Maria’s. I suppose that’s the reason I’ve

been so eager for love ever since.' Could Jean have known that it was Lady Roughton's lips, instead of her hands, which were now touching her hair, how surprised she would have been! Unconsciously she went on: 'Then, although I tried to learn well, and Miss Bowles said I was pretty well advanced for my age, I did so many wrong things out of study hours. But it was often only to try how it felt, you know, and because nobody cared about my being good. I thought I was quite alone in the world. But one day it suddenly turned out that I had had a father living all the time. He had intended me to be trained for a governess, to earn my own living. I know now that something had happened which made him not care for me, and so wished me to believe that he was dead; but he suddenly altered his mind, and wrote to say I was to live with my aunt and cousins until he returned to England, and have lots of money to spend. Ah, what a change it was! How delightful to leave Ivy Lodge at last! It was almost too much happiness for me to bear at first. The life at dear old Fernside was so delightful. I had never imagined there could be anything like it out of a fairy tale. Aunt Maria was so kind, and so was Cousin Maude—as kind as she could be, considering—'

'Considering what?'

‘The difference between us. She was so clever and beautiful that of course she found me tiresome at first.’

‘Oh, indeed.’

‘Then there was Cousin Louis; he was so kind——’

‘What sort of kindness was his?’

‘Like a dear brother’s, you know, and I was so fond of him until he wanted me to be fonder, and—— Now, where ought I to go on?’ she said, pausing a moment or two. ‘There was to be a *fête* at the Grange. There never was, and never could be, any place like Ardsey Grange, Lady Roughton, not even in fairy books.’

‘Then *he* dwelt there?’

‘Yes,’ with a smile and a blush and a tear.

‘Everybody looked forward to the Grange *fête*. But it did not turn out to be such a very happy day for me, for I gave pain to—— Oh dear, how difficult it is to tell a story when you want to leave some of the things out! Well, he was Annie’s brother, and I was so sorry to make him unhappy, you see——’

‘I understand why, child.’

Jean looked relieved. ‘So I was rather glad when at last evening came, though it was the first time I had heard a band play. Aunt Maria was tired, and wanted to go, so she sent me to look

after Maude. She was in the woods with Nugent. Do you like the name, Lady Roughton ?'

' Yes, child ; go on.'

' My cousin had just had an accident when I reached them, having fallen down and dislocated her ankle. We had to carry her into the house, and she could not be moved for some weeks. His aunt—she lived with him to keep his house and so forth, you know—asked me to remain at the Grange to be useful to Maude, and so I came to know him. He had always made fun of me before, about my school ways and not knowing things, and I thought he was disagreeable and unkind for laughing at me. But I began to carry books and notes and flowers from him to Maude and her answers back, and then we knew each other better. He gave me permission to go into the dear old library whenever I pleased, and take any of the books to read. Then we used to talk about things, and so I came to love him, and I knew he loved me ; though he had not told me so, I knew it. One day I had a letter from papa ; he was coming back to live in England, and we were to be together. I had carried my letter into the Grange woods to read it quite by myself, and Nugent happened to find me there. But of course I did not mind him. I read little bits out to him until I came upon a sentence about hoping that there

was no love-making going on, and then it all came out. Oh, Lady Roughton, he had been the same as engaged to my cousin for years ! ’

‘ What was he ? ’

‘ Good,’ calmly and decidedly ; then in a lower tone : ‘ The parting was very hard to bear——’

‘ Parting ? ’

‘ Of course, we had to give each other up.’

‘ Why ? ’

‘ He had been the same as engaged to my cousin for years, you know.’

‘ And it would not have been a sin,’ murmured Lady Roughton.

‘ It would have been a sin against Maude,’ returned Jean, in some surprise.

‘ But—for love’s sake ? ’ said Lady Roughton ; it sounded almost pleadingly.

‘ One cannot do wrong for love’s sake. Oh, Lady Roughton, you are not one of those who think so meanly of love as that ! Would you have married Sir Arthur if another woman had been wronged by it ? No, of course not.’

Lady Roughton’s eyes fell, and she shrank back from contact with the girl, making her a sign to continue her story.

‘ It was very hard to bear, all the same, and it gets harder for me every day to think of him as Maude’s husband ; but——’

‘If it were a thousand times harder, you would do the same again !’

‘Why, yes, of course ! There would be nothing else *to* be done, you know.’ Then, noticing the increased pallor of the other’s face : ‘I am afraid I tire you, Lady Roughton ?’

‘No ; is your story finished ?’

‘Nearly. Poor Maude in some way found out about his loving me, and she did not like me so well afterwards, though I did my best to make her understand that I had not tried to destroy her happiness.’

‘Do you think it ever occurred to her that she was destroying yours ?’

‘It is not destroyed ; I have not wronged her in my heart. It is harder for her than for me if she thinks I did. After my father’s death, she did not like me for another reason.’

‘What became of his property ? You said he was rich, did you not ?’

‘Yes, he was : but my aunt and cousins had more right to his money than I.’

‘How could that be ?’

‘It came out that he had not married my mother.’

‘They told you that ! And they taught you to despise your miserable mother !’

‘No one could teach me what I do not choose to learn, Lady Roughton,’ stiffly.

‘Nevertheless, she would perceive—I tell you she could better endure the scorn of all the world than such condemnation as yours.’

‘Lady Roughton !’

‘Mean as well as you would, every word of yours would be the bitterest reproach to her; your very love would reproach her. A thousand times better for both that she is dead. You said she is, did you not ?’

‘Yes, soon after I was born; but it is not better for me, Lady Roughton.’

‘You do not know the awful gulf there would be between you. You do not know—thank God, you never will—how completely you and she would be separated !’

‘Nothing could separate my love from my mother—nothing ! You are unkind, Lady Roughton !’ hotly.

‘Hush, I would not have you different for all the world !’

‘I want to be what my mother would have me be.’

‘I think your miserable mother would thank God that you cannot be as she was. Be thankful that you inherit no tendency—’

‘I am not a bit thankful if I inherit anything

that other people don't inherit, Lady Roughton. Thankful ! No, indeed ; I should be quite ashamed of getting to the right side of your gulf *that way* !' Then, with a toss of the head and little defiant laugh, she went on : ' Not that it is a bit likely that I am there. I am not so sure that I do not inherit a tendency or affinity, or whatever you please to call it, to evil. Miss Bowles was always punishing me for what she termed my inherent defects, and she ought to know, I suppose.'

' You do not know—thank God you never, never will ! '

' Oh yes, I do ! ' exclaimed the girl, irritated beyond endurance by the other's tone. ' I will give you a proof that I do not belong to your perfect people. A girl came one day to Mrs. Brice's shop, and I could not understand how it was that my heart went so tenderly out to her. She seemed miserable, but it was not only that, and it was not her being poor—no, I saw none but poor people then. It was some special appeal to my heart—to my love. There must have been some affinity between us, for I felt impelled to kiss her, and I made her let me. When she was gone Mrs. Brice told me that respectable people avoided girls like her. So there was the attraction, you see ! '

‘The attraction was not her sin—you brought that home to her as it had never yet been brought home—it was your love and her deep pitiful need of such love. She may have been afraid of pure women before ; but your kiss gave her a belief—oh, Jean, a belief !’

‘What have I done? Oh, Lady Roughton what is it—have I made you ill? Pray forgive me.’

For Lady Roughton was on the floor clinging about the young girl’s feet, Jean did not perceive that she was kissing them. She knelt down, and took the drooping head on to her breast. ‘What ever shall I do! I ought to have borne with you, knowing you are ill. Shall I never learn to hide up my thoughts, unfortunate girl that I am !’

Lady Roughton looked up into the girl’s eyes, but with an expression in her own very different to the anger Jean expected to see in them.

‘I beg your pardon, Lady Roughton. I mean for saying it.’ It was not possible even now to apologise for having felt it.

‘Hush, child; you do not know. Do you think I am angry—angry? I once knew—some-one who had sinned—as that poor girl had, and—in her name bless God for what you have taught me. The Book tells me, and I hear it preached,

but I have never dared to realise it until now. If the pure can feel such tender love and mercy here!' She broke down sobbing upon Jean's neck.

'Then you did not really mean to be unkind about my mother?' said Jean, not a little puzzled as well as astonished. 'It was fancying that which made me in such a temper, you know.'

'No one in the world could pity her more deeply than I—the very angels might pity her now!' Noting the young girl's look of astonishment, she added confusedly, 'I—I mean for—being separated from her child.' Then lowering her voice, 'Will you—kiss me, Jean—you said you kissed that poor girl?'

Jean was speechless with astonishment. She was still utterly blind to the truth, seeing no more than the bare words said. She bent down and tenderly kissed the drooping face, then softly laid her cheek against the other's and remained silent. A terribly bitter struggle was going on in Lady Roughton's mind, her whole soul yearning for the love which a word from her would call forth. But, whatever she had once been, self was not the first consideration with her now, and she presently put the temptation aside. For Jean's sake she would try to be content with such love as a stranger could win. At length she overcame,

succeeded in recovering her self-control, more accustomed to exercise it than was her companion, and said with a little attempt at a smile and a jest: ‘We must not let Floyd find me here, or she will think that I have been worse than I really have.’

Jean tenderly assisted her to the low chair again, and knelt down beside her.

‘I shall never forgive myself if I have made you worse, dear Lady Roughton. I did not understand—’

‘Child, you have done me good—how much good you can never know,’ with a low sigh. Presently she went on nervously, terribly afraid of herself, yet feeling compelled to say so much: ‘And, out of gratitude for your tender mercy towards—her I told you about—your tender pity for one reaches all—I must ever be your friend. Will you try to think of me and trust me as one?’

‘Dear Lady Roughton, how thankful I am, how very very thankful! I can hardly explain my feelings; but this I know that I shall love you very dearly if you will let me?’

‘Yes; I will let you, child. Who would object to be dearly loved do you think?’ returned the elder lady, trying to speak in a light tone.

‘How happy I feel to be close to you like

this!' presently murmured Jean, nestling her cheek down to the other's hand! 'It seems almost as if I had known you in some other life, and this was but a renewing.'

'Child, child!'

'To think of my fancying you could mean to speak reproachfully of my mother!'

'And,' thought Lady Roughton, 'to think of my fancying that the pure could have no pity for her!'

'We shall understand each other better as time goes on, Jean.'

'And you quite forgive my showing off, don't you?'

'Quite,' returned Lady Roughton, with a sad smile.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

FAST FRIENDS.

THE slight restraint which had first existed between them was gone for ever, and Jean and Lady Roughton were fast friends. It was a friendship such as Jean had never before realised. Lady Roughton seemed to have no greater pleasure than studying how to gratify her young companion's tastes, petting her in all sorts of ways; and Jean 'blushed and bloomed' under it all in shy delight, more grateful than she could find words to express for the love and kindness lavished upon her. 'How glad would *he* be to know she had found a haven such as this!' she thought.

It was very soon understood by the servants that they could not better please their mistress than by attending to Miss Bell's comforts, and they vied with each other in anticipating her wants. They believed it to be only a sudden whim of their mistress's which was not likely to

last long, but whilst it did they best served their own interests by indulging it.

Jean could be just herself now with her friend, and Lady Roughton took the deepest interest in studying the pure, fresh, young mind so frankly offered for her perusal. It did her good to watch Jean flitting delightedly about her new home, giving free expression to her girlish fancies—the romance and enthusiasm so healthily balanced by the natural vigour and freshness of her intelligence. Then, she took so much pride in the girl's beauty (she was one of the few to whom it was beauty), and exercised her taste in ordering the most charming toilettes for her with so true a perception of what was becoming to Jean, that the latter always appeared simply dressed. Only minds so appreciative upon such subjects as Floyd's could have told how really expensive was the elegant simplicity. Jean herself would have been the last to guess the value of the things she wore. Lady Roughton was secretly amused at her ignorance, and not at all inclined to enlighten her. So Jean's days passed delightfully on, everything that could be thought of being done for her happiness. There were pleasant drives, Lady Roughton lying back amongst her cushions, listening with her sad smile to the girl's enthusiasm ; the walks in the square with Floyd, new books, music, flowers, and

happy quiet Sundays. They generally drove to some quiet, suburban church, avoiding fashionable neighbourhoods and keeping out of notice as much as possible. Lady Roughton never talked religion; but Jean knew that many a time tears were raining down her cheeks under her thick veil as she knelt in prayer. But although there was apparently some irrevocable sorrow and regret in her own mind, she made Jean feel that she liked to see others happy, and encouraged instead of checking the young girl's buoyancy of spirits.

‘I think you must find some pet name for me, my love,’ one morning said Lady Roughton, after a little thought.

‘I call you all sorts of pet names in my heart,’ laughed Jean, perching herself on the side of Lady Roughton’s chair and putting one arm round her neck. ‘The last was blessing—how do you like being my blessing?’

But the other had spoken with a purpose.

‘I *think* I want *something* more *individual*—an especial *pet name* for when we are quite alone, you know.’ Then, with the colour faintly tinging her cheeks, and a little laugh, it might be to hide some deeper emotion, she went on; ‘How if you were sometimes to call me—Mother?’

Jean sat gravely silent a few moments; then, in a low voice, replied, ‘It is so kind of you to

wish it ; but, dear, I could not. It belongs to her in my thoughts and prayers.'

To Jean's great relief, Lady Roughton smiled content. ' Well, well, I ought not to object to that. Call me what you will, my child.'

So Jean found all sorts of pet names for her, and she seemed never tired of listening to the girl's nonsense talk.

' I shall begin to think that you do care for me a little if you run on at that rate, you foolish child,' she would say again and again, just to call forth Jean's laughing protest.

' But I don't care for you a little, dear. The idea of accusing me of such a thing ! Care for you a little, indeed ! Do you take me for a jelly fish, madam ? Let me beg you to understand that I am not the kind of person to do things a little.'

' Well, perhaps, I ought to have known that ! ' smiled her ladyship.

' To be sure you ought, and you must be well punished for not knowing it.'

The other bore her punishment of being ' well kissed up ' as Jean termed it, in the meekest way. In truth, it was more like the frank, tender intercourse between mother and child than anything else, and Lady Roughton began to revive wonderfully under the new aspect of things. It

was the opinion of one or two in the household that her reviving so much under this new influence when all her husband's generous efforts had had no effect, was not very complimentary to him. But he did not appear to look upon it in that light. On his side he was extremely cordial to Jean. As she lost her first shyness, and expanded a little to him, he was highly amused at the freshness of her talk and the transparent singleness of her mind; its directness, and keen discrimination between right and wrong. As time went on, he found himself more and more frequently appealing to her upon all sorts of questions, and was secretly amused at the impossibility of mystifying her. When appealed to, she would gravely and carefully divest an idea of its swaddling clothes, and judge it by its right or wrong, in a simple, unconscious fashion of her own which was particularly fascinating to a man of his calibre—given to put a little too much value upon words. The directness and simplicity with which she would acknowledge, 'Well, I don't understand that a bit!' when he offered a problem for her solution. 'Would you mind telling me once more?' Then, with a grave shake of the head, 'It sounds right, and yet I feel that there is something wrong about it.' It was in reference to one of his speeches upon the labour

question, which he had just read to her, and of which he was a little proud.

‘Where is the flaw?’ he asked.

‘That is what I can’t find out—not yet,’ she returned, wrinkling up her brows. ‘Would you mind reading it just once more, Sir Arthur? I will fancy myself a labouring man, and see what he thinks about it.’ She sat gravely listening, with closed eyes; and what the labouring man thought, not a little startled Sir Arthur Roughton.

‘Did you really tell him that, child?’ would laugh Lady Roughton, highly amused.

‘Sir Arthur said I was to tell him exactly what I thought; so of course I did, and he was not a bit angry about it.’

No,—Lady Roughton found that her husband appeared to appreciate Jean quite as much as she desired he should. Fastidious as he was, he had not a word to say against Jean. His wife found him as ready to make plans for the girl’s comfort and amusement as she was herself.

One morning, whilst waiting for Sir Arthur to join her at the breakfast table, Jean took up the ‘Times,’ and was idly glancing at the first column when her eyes suddenly lighted upon the announcement:

‘On the fifteenth, at Raystone, by the Rev. Dr. Brayleigh, Nugent, only son of the late Allan

Orme, Esq., of Ardsey Grange, to Maude, only daughter of the late Dr. Poynder, &c., &c.'

'What is the matter, are you not well, Miss Bell?' said Sir Arthur, who presently afterwards entered the room.

She was standing on the hearth-rug, white and still as a marble statue, holding the paper crushed in her hands. He guessed that she had come upon bad news of some kind, and added gently, for she answered him never a word, staring blankly before her, 'I am afraid you have found some bad news in that paper?'

'Yes.'

Then, she mechanically sat down, and began to pour out his coffee.

He delicately abstained from looking towards her, occupying himself with his letters.

'May I give you any more, Sir Arthur?'

'No, thank you.'

'Will you excuse me?'

Then he saw that she had merely attended to his wants, taking nothing herself. Opening the door for her, he said,

'I am sorry to have detained you, Miss Bell. I hoped we had succeeded in making you feel at home here.'

'You have,' she murmured.

'No, you were not friendly enough to quit

the room until the usual time, because I was such a dolt as not to perceive I was detaining you.'

' You are always kind to me, Sir Arthur,' she replied, looking up into his face without attempting to conceal her tears.

' That is the right and proper thing to say, I suppose ; but you have taught me to expect both something more and something less than what is conventionally proper from you.' He might have said that she had taught him a new creed altogether about her sex.

' What ought I to say ? ' she returned, afraid of seeming ungracious, or worse, ungrateful. ' I am sure I want to say what is right. No,' with a little deprecatory look, ' I want to say something more than what is only right. I never had such friends as dear Lady Roughton and you. I am often quite afraid to open my eyes when I wake in the morning, lest I should find my being here has been only a pleasant dream. And I like you, not only because you are good to me, but because you are good ; do believe it.'

He bowed and let her pass out without farther protest. After all, she had been friendly enough to carry off his paper, and that not his most intimate friend could have done with impunity a few months previously. In truth, Sir Arthur Roughton

was not the same man he had been before Jean's advent. He had been gradually lapsing into the self-indulgent habits of a man without any demand upon his affections, and with ample means to gratify his tastes. His wife was perfectly satisfied with his daily half-hour's visit. He had got accustomed to acquiesce in their separate life; and would now probably have found it impossible to keep up any semblance of feeling more than kindly towards her.

In a moment, Lady Roughton saw the shadow in Jean's face, and anxiously questioned, glancing at the paper which the girl still held in her hand, 'Dear child, the death of some one you love?'

'Yes, the same—he is married—it is a sin now.'

Lady Roughton understood and asked no more. But all that delicate, tender love could do in the way of softening the blow was done. Jean was not a little ashamed of the misery she endured. Although she had been so long trying to prepare herself for it, the news had given her a terrible shock when it came. She despised herself for suffering; but she suffered none the less. Then, the attempts of her kind friends to cheer and pet her seemed only to irritate her. She was half-conscious that hers was a nature better able to

bear trouble without petting ; in truth, that a course of hard work would have been less enervating than the luxurious life she was leading. She was no exotic, and it did not improve her to be treated as one.

As Lady Roughton watched her growing thinner and paler, she forgot her own weakness, and exerted herself more and more in her anxiety for Jean ; and her husband was gravely concerned. He supposed that Jean had seen the death of some friend in the paper, and his wife had her reasons for not undeceiving him. She had given Jean a hint that it would be as well to avoid telling Sir Arthur anything about her past history, or mentioning the names of her relatives to him, and the girl had very willingly obeyed her. Sir Arthur believed Jean's to be the every-day story of a poor relation neglected by rich ones. His wife encouraged him to do everything that lay in his power to cheer Jean. Her face always lighted up with a smile when he sent home some little offering for Jean in his wife's name, and she even gave him an occasional hint as to the kind of presents which would be most acceptable to a young girl. Jean was beginning to feel quite ashamed of possessing such a collection of valuable things. One gift she always wore, and valued far above the rest—a locket containing a fine portrait of Lady Roughton,

attached to a slender gold necklet. Sir Arthur and his wife had together chosen the beautiful locket for her; but Jean had not the slightest idea of the real value of the stones forming the monogram M.R. on the back of it, or how near she was to the literal truth in calling it her most valuable treasure.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

AT THE THEATRE.

THE servants were looking on with wonder, gossiping a great deal over their master's and mistress's infatuation for Miss Bell. If she had been their own child she could not have been more pampered and indulged ; whilst every servant in the house knew that his or her situation depended upon their behaviour towards Miss Bell. Had not James been dismissed by his master at once, with a quarter's wages, for some inattention to her at the table ? True, she did not seem to care about it all, and was pleasant and unpretending enough with them ; but they were getting more and more inclined to believe that that was only her art. Besides, what did she go about looking so dismal for, when everyone in the house was at their wits' end trying to do things to please her ? Companion, indeed ! when the whole house was put into commotion if she looked a trifle paler than usual. She might thank her lucky stars that she

was not with some ladies ; though it might do her good to be taken down a little. Then, as time went on, whispers began to circulate about there being another cause for her becoming so set up above other people ; ominous shakes of the head ; wonder how a certain person could be so blind as not to see what was going on under her very nose, &c., &c.

‘ It’s to be the theatre now,’ one morning said the butler, as he entered the housekeeper’s room after his attendance at the breakfast table.

‘ She fancies that she might possibly be amused, and, of course, he must go himself to secure the best box at the Haymarket for her.’

Sir Arthur had made some allusion to a piece criticised in one of the morning papers, and Jean had remarked she did not know what a theatre was like. As the butler said, that was quite enough for Sir Arthur. A box must be got at once.

‘ And her ladyship is every bit as bad ! ’ said Floyd. ‘ She was quite delighted when my young lady condescended to say that she would go. And you are to accompany her, Mrs. Lane ; Lady Roughton cannot of course venture, and so she is going to trust her to you for this once.’

The housekeeper tossed her head, and opined that the sooner her ladyship’s eyes were opened about the girl the better. But she was not quite

so averse to spending an evening in a comfortable box at the theatre, as she would have had the others believe.

Lady Roughton was highly amused at Jean's speculations as to what a theatre would be like.

'Shall I have to be dressed up as if for a party, dear?'

'No, full dress would not be in good taste, my love; particularly as you will be accompanied only by Mrs. Lane. Your high white muslin dress will be quite sufficient.'

And in her simple muslin dress, and an Indian embroidered bournous of Lady Roughton's, with a delicate flush in her cheeks, and her eyes brilliant with excitement, Jean did look charming enough to warrant Floyd's expression of admiration. For, notwithstanding her prejudice against the young girl, she was too true an artiste of her class not to admire her from a professional point of view.

'How I should enjoy dressing you for a ball, Miss Bell!' she exclaimed, winning a smile from her mistress for the speech. 'But does not your ladyship think there should be just one bit of colour—a rose or bow in the hair?'

'No, Floyd, there is colour enough, I think, and the shape of Miss Bell's head is better seen, dressed in her own simple fashion.' For she had

the good taste to perceive that no colour could be finer than the soft rose of the cheeks, and no ornament more becoming than the natural crown to the dainty head. She gazed at the sweet girlish face with tender, yearning eyes, then shaded them with her hand, as she sank back in her chair with a low sigh.

‘You are not so well to-night!’ ejaculated Jean, forgetting her muslin, and kneeling down by the other’s side. ‘Do not let me leave you —indeed, indeed, I should not enjoy myself a bit. Dear, you *know* I should not if—’

‘Foolish child! I am quite as usual, and shall be decidedly the better for knowing you are enjoying yourself.’

‘Really—really?’

‘Yes, really, really,’ with an assuring smile.

‘The carriage is at the door, Miss Bell; and this is the bouquet from Sir Arthur,’ said Floyd, with a meaning look towards her mistress. Surely, Lady Roughton would not put up with that.

‘Let me look, my darling,’ said her ladyship. ‘Ah, I am glad he thought of a holder; and this is a really pretty one, is it not?’

‘Well!’ mentally ejaculated Floyd.

‘And are not the flowers lovely?’ said Jean, ‘My favourites too; as though Sir Arthur remem-

bered my saying I liked them. How *very* kind of him, was it not, dear?' turning them about for Lady Roughton to admire.

'The carriage is waiting, Miss Bell,' repeated Floyd, hardly able to contain herself, and looking as severe as she dared.

Jean put her arm round Lady Roughton's neck, kissing her as a child kisses its mother.

Then, attended by Floyd, she descended to the hall, where she found Mrs. Lane, the housekeeper, in her state silk dress and prettiest cap, waiting to accompany her. Sir Arthur came out of the library to lead her to the carriage.

'You will be careful to keep quite close to Miss Bell in passing to and returning from the box, Mrs. Lane. There may be some little crush in coming out.'

'Very well, Sir Arthur,' stiffly replied Mrs. Lane.

'How *very* kind he is!' thought Jean, as she took her seat in the comfortable carriage, and they were whirled away. Presently she added aloud,—

'Have you ever been to a theatre before, Mrs. Lane?'

'Many and many a time, Miss Bell.'

'Then you will tell me what to do, will you not?'

'There's nothing to do but sit still and look on,' returned Mrs. Lane.

‘I cannot imagine it a bit.’

‘Here we are, Miss Bell, and Sir Arthur said you were to keep close to me, you know.’

Jean alighted from the carriage, and walked by the side of Mrs. Lane, with flushed cheeks and dilated eyes. They were shown to their box and took their seats—Jean in front, and the house-keeper a little behind.

‘But there is a chair, here; will not you see better from the front, Mrs. Lane?’

She was so unmistakably in earnest that Mrs. Lane, who had made up her mind to be very distant and dignified, softened a little towards her as she took the chair Jean indicated. The curtain rose as soon as they were seated, and Jean sat listening and gazing in a whirl of excitement, quite unconscious that others were not equally absorbed in the performance, and that she was beginning to attract some attention by her manifest forgetfulness of everything but the stage. She sat with her elbow on the cushion, and her chin in the palm of her hand, following every word; so deeply interested in the heroine’s fortunes that when she became involved in misery, Jean took out her pocket-handkerchief and wiped away her falling tears.

‘It is really quite shameful to treat her so! I wonder she bears it so well,’ ejaculated indignant

Jean. 'They ought to *know* she could not do such a thing.'

Mrs. Lane vouchsafed no reply.

'Look, mamma, at the charming *ingénue* in the opposite box !' smiled a fashionably attired girl, of about Jean's own age, who had long given up the illusions of youth.

'By Jove, it's real !' said a lounger in the stalls, after a few moments' study of Jean through his glass. 'Look at that girl in white, Cleveland ; she's positively rubbing her eyes !'

'Where was she raised ?' languidly said his companion, after examining her in turn : 'And who is the old woman ?'

Mrs. Lane, who was not given to sentiment, sat gazing stolidly through her spectacles, with her hands folded at her capacious waist. It was all very well for play-acting, but she was not going to waste her sympathies upon a heroine who raved about her poverty, in a white satin dress, and, in her deepest misery, found time to shoot killing glances into the stage box. The contrast between Jean and her companion was, in truth, marked enough to attract attention and comment. But when, in the interval between the acts, the girl looked round the house and became conscious of the sea of faces which surrounded her, she shrank back, glad to avail herself of the friendly shade of

the curtain. ‘What a host of people !’ she murmured, and for the rest of the evening she laughed and cried out of sight.

As the evening wore on, Mrs. Lane took note of one especial pair of eyes in an opposite corner of the house, and she pursed up her lips with an air of severe disapproval, as she found that whether the performance was going on or not those eyes never turned from the spot where Jean sat. She glanced frequently and suspiciously at Jean, but the girl was unmistakably absorbed in what was going on on the stage, and continued sitting as much out of sight as possible.

‘Do you wish to wait for the last piece, Miss Bell ?’ she asked crossly.

‘Why, yes, of course !’ returned Jean, quite surprised at being asked such a question. ‘Who would think of leaving till it was all over ?’

‘I only thought you might like to return a little earlier on account of Lady Roughton, Miss Bell.’

‘Oh, thank you, for telling me, Mrs. Lane, I had forgotten all about the time, and it must be getting late,’ said Jean, rising at once.

There were several loungers about the lobbies and stairs, who gazed admiringly and curiously at the girl shyly pressing on by the old woman’s

side, and not a few speculations were made as to who and what she was.

As soon as they were seated in the carriage, and on their way home, Jean's tongue was unloosed, and she expressed her wonder and delight at what they had seen, in her own fashion.

‘Did not you feel just the same when you first saw a play, Mrs. Lane? Did not it seem like a fairy tale?’

‘I never knew anything about fairy tales, Miss Bell.’

And afterwards Mrs. Lane sat taciturn and severe, not to be won over by any amount of talk. She had seen what she had seen, and that was enough for her, as she afterwards informed her confidant, Mrs. Floyd.

‘There he was sitting with his eyes fixed upon her the whole evening, and there he was getting out of a cab just as we drove up to the door; and don’t tell me that she was so blind as she made believe to be.’

‘But the wonder of it is that her ladyship can’t see!’ said Floyd. ‘It’s just as though she were bewitched. She can’t bear Miss Bell to be out of her sight, except it is to be enjoying herself. You can always put her into a good humour by saying a word in praise of Miss Bell.’

‘Such a supper as was ordered to tempt her

appetite when she got back, too,' added Mrs. Lane. ' Every delicacy that could be thought of!'

A day or two after her visit to the theatre, Jean began to droop again, and all sorts of fresh amusements were talked of by Lady Roughton and her husband. Where would she like to go? Concerts, theatres, exhibitions,—they read out the advertisements to her in the hope of getting her to express a wish; but she only shook her head.

'I think if I were to get up early to do some kind of work,' she one day replied to Lady Roughton's anxious questionings, and hints about getting medical advice. 'I wish you did not mind my going out by myself.'

'Out by yourself! Why, child?'

'Because, I think, it would do me good to go and help Mrs. Brice for an hour or two in the morning.'

'How do you mean, "help" her, my love?'

'Oh, cleaning work; mending, comforting up, anything wanted to be done, you know.'

'If you really wish it, my child,' hesitated Lady Roughton; tenderly smoothing back the hair from the girl's broad brow. 'But I am a little jealous of Mrs. Brice being able to do more for you than I can.'

‘As if anybody could do as much for me as you can !’

‘Well, then, I will say I am disappointed that the life here does not suit you.’

‘Dear, kind Lady Roughton ; it would suit me if I were stronger—more good, you know,’ said Jean, drawing the other’s hand to her lips.

‘Sir Arthur thinks that change of scene and air might do you good. Would you like to go to the sea, dear child, if we take a house in some pretty, cheerful place ?’

‘For me ! Oh, no, no, indeed, you must not ! How selfish I must be getting, to draw so much attention to myself !’

‘Do not fear that, child. Would you like to go, Jean ?’

‘Would *you* like it, dear ?’

‘Yes, I think the change might do me some good. I am sure it would if I saw you improving.’

Jean could not but acknowledge she would like to see the sea, and that was enough. Sir Arthur saw an agent, and engaged a house for the season at Broadstairs, that place being recommended by Lady Roughton’s physicians. ‘I *must* get strong and happy now,’ thought Jean. ‘It would be the basest ingratitude not to.’ And, to prove to her kind friends that she was feeling as

she was in duty bound to feel, she forced herself to laugh and talk and look gay, and fancied she deceived them. The sea was a new knowledge to her, and for the first few days it had an exhilarating effect upon her spirits. But she soon got to care for nothing else but to sit gazing at it, and then they found that that was not the kind of tonic she required, although she declared she was quite well.

The medical man whom, at length, Lady Roughton anxiously consulted, was a general practitioner with too much business to care about fostering the idiosyncrasies of chance visitors to the place. He saw the mistake they were making and plainly told them so. Instead of petting and watching her as they were doing, they were to employ every hour of her time and see that she went healthily tired to bed every night. In fine, the best thing he could recommend for such a temperament was healthy exercise for mind and body, and plenty of it. Delicate? pooh, nonsense! only a healthy organisation rebelling against unhealthy treatment.

Lady Roughton held counsel with her husband, and they agreed that Dr. Wilford's plan should be tried.

'He says she ought to take long walks, and that scrambling about over the rocks would do

her an immense deal of good. I must give her an object—to get me specimens of sea-weed, or what not, and perhaps you would not mind accompanying her sometimes, Arthur, when you are here ?'

‘Oh, no.’

‘And, what do you think of trying a little yachting with her? You used to like yachting so much, and I fancy she would be a good sailor.’

He readily consented, and his wife amused herself in choosing the prettiest yachting costumes to be had.

‘Does not she make the bonniest sailor, Floyd?’ exclaimed Lady Roughton, appealing for the maid’s admiration.

‘It’s a very becoming dress, my lady,’ reluctantly assented Floyd, who was quite aware that the pretty, dark blue, serge dress and open collar, and the simple sailor’s hat with its crimson ribbon were especially becoming to the girl’s delicate, refined face and figure. Just the kind of dress which gives a little piquant touch to one kind of girl, and makes a less refined one look too demonstrative. Floyd saw all that; but, as she afterwards told her friend Mrs. Lane, she was not going to fall down and worship a girl because her dress became her. If Lady Roughton chose to be

blinded, Floyd did not. ‘ Prettiness does not make up for the want of other things in *my* eyes, Mrs. Lane ! ’

In truth, the servants were beginning to think that Jean must be more than ordinarily designing ; for watch her as they might they could never find her out. Lady Roughton could not get anyone to express admiration enough for Jean, to satisfy her. Even her husband was beginning to say less and less about the girl.

A trial trip was taken across the bay ; Lady Roughton watching the little yacht through a glass from her window. Then, the agreed-upon signal that Jean’s nautical behaviour was good—a small union jack—was run up, amidst merry laughter on board, and the yacht was swiftly bowling away before the wind.

‘ Ah, this is delightful—like doing something ! ’ exclaimed Jean, her cheeks flushed, and eyes brilliant with excitement, as she stood clinging to a rope, her hair blown about by the wind. ‘ I was afraid that I should have to stay in that little place, where I could only peep out of that tiny window, because I am a girl ! ’

Sir Arthur laughed out as he had not laughed for many a long year. In truth, he was younger for his age than he had imagined himself to be— younger than many a less quiet living man of

thirty. Before Jean's advent, he had fancied himself quite settled down into grave, quiet, middle life, with a developing taste for politics. But here was he enjoying the sail as keenly as the veriest schoolboy; challenging Jean to all sorts of nonsense talk.

She was quick to observe the change. 'How much nicer he is when you get to know him,' she thought. 'The idea of my ever having thought him stiff! He lets me say anything to him, now!'

But Jean's 'anything,' when she just let her thoughts flow into words as they came! It was as great a revelation to Sir Arthur as it had been to Nugent Orme. If he was less stiff, as she termed it, he was almost reverential in his tone towards her, paying her more respect than he had ever before paid to woman. Though he had always been courteous enough in his bearing towards women, it had been only the conventional courtesy of good breeding before he knew Jean.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

IN FACE OF DEATH.

‘THE sail appears really to have done you good, dear child !’ fondly said Lady Roughton, who had been waiting on the pier for the return of the yacht.

‘Oh, yes ! it was delightful, and Sir Arthur was so kind, telling me all about the things. He thinks that if he had a good yacht you might enjoy coasting about, this glorious weather. Dear, do you think you would ? It would make it quite perfect if you were with us.’

‘Well, perhaps ; we shall see by-and-bye, when the days are at their longest, child.’

‘Fancy being out there at night. It was lovely enough looking from the end of the pier last night, when the outlines grew softened, and the houses began to look like fairy temples and palaces in the air. What it must seem from farther out at sea ! To lie gently rocking, out there, dropping one’s troublesome thoughts into

the waves, out of sight. Not that we quite trust each other yet, you know !' playfully tossing a bit of seaweed at an incoming wave. 'I gave you a thought to keep the other night, and instead of hiding it up as you promised, you came and threw it at my feet in open daylight before the people—after promising to care for me and getting all my secrets out of me—whispering such things to me in the moonlight—you know you did !'

'Romantic child !' laughed Lady Roughton. 'Run and change your dress—Nay, do not hesitate ; here is Sir Arthur coming, and he will bring me home.' Following Jean with her eyes, as she ran lightly up the steps ; she added to her husband, 'Is she not charming in that dress, Arthur ? How very different to the conventional girls one sees.'

'Yes. Are you better to-day, Mary—beginning to feel any benefit from being here ? Will this air suit you, do you think ?'

'I think I am a trifle better ; as much better as I shall ever be. And you know I always liked the sea.' After a short silence, she went on, apparently on the spur of the moment, in reality after long and anxious deliberation, 'I am so glad you appreciate Jean, Arthur. Her coming was like a ray of sunlight let into my life. But I

often feel a little anxious about her future. My health is so precarious, and if I am suddenly taken away, she will be so utterly alone, so friendless and ignorant of the world—thank God she will ever be that! Arthur, you are very rich; my little income would be as nothing to you now—and—and she would be utterly penniless; when—nay, the time must come—when I am gone, may I hope that you will not let her feel—alone in the world?

‘She shall not,’ in a low voice, replied Sir Arthur.

‘How good you are to me! My mind will now be at rest for I know the value of your word.’ Then, laying her hand upon his, she went on impressively, ‘And I want you by-and-bye to remember that the thought of her finding a protector in you was very comforting to me.’

He reddened to the roots of his hair, as he lifted his wife’s hand to his lips; quite incapable of uttering a word. He thought he understood her, and she thought she understood him; yet each would have been quite aghast at the revelation, could they have read what was passing in the other’s mind.

‘I have now only to write a letter to him, to be read after my death,’ thought his wife. ‘His best plan would be to find her a home with some

cheerful family, which my two hundred a year will very well pay for. In time, perhaps, she may meet someone able to efface the remembrance of that man' (Lady Roughton was somewhat of Martha's opinion respecting Nugent Orme), 'At any rate, my darling will not have to undergo poverty again !'

'Poor Mary !' was her husband's reflection. 'What an unselfish thought, very few women would be capable of saying that much to a husband !'

Then, as they slowly returned to the house, said Lady Roughton ; 'It is fortunate your being able to be down here so much just now—to go about with her. Is not there a concert or something at the rooms to-night? Will you take her ?'

Finding that he did not object, she was constantly planning little excursions for Jean and him.

'However she can do it, sending them out alone together, at all times and seasons as she does, beats me,' thought Floyd. 'And it's not a bit of use trying to put her on her guard. When I said yesterday that Miss Bell and Sir Arthur were very fond of going out together, she actually looked quite pleased. It don't seem natural. I think I see myself sending a husband off with a

pretty girl day after day as she does ! John Brill needn't expect that, I can tell him !'

'Take a wrap down to the pier, Floyd. You will find Sir Arthur and Miss Bell somewhere there, and I am afraid she may not be warm enough in that thin jacket, poor darling !'

'Poor darling, indeed !' mentally ejaculated Floyd, obeying under protest, and as she herself termed it, 'flouncing' down with a shawl to the end of the pier, where Sir Arthur and Jean were lingering in the moonlight.

'Oh, thank you, Floyd. I am not cold ; but it was kind of you to think of it,' said Jean.

'It was Lady Roughton's kindness,' somewhat roughly returned Floyd, as she turned away, indignant at perceiving Sir Arthur's sudden anxiety lest Jean should take cold, carefully folding the wrap round her in spite of her laughing protests. Floyd's indignation was not allayed by hearing one young lady remark to another, with a glance at Sir Arthur and Jean, 'Lovers.'

That night when Floyd saw Jean alone, she said, eyeing the girl sharply as she spoke, 'What do you think I heard some young ladies say about you and Sir Arthur, on the pier to-night, Miss Bell ?'

'About me and Sir Arthur ! What could they have to say ?' asked Jean.

‘They said you were lovers.’

‘Lovers! How ridiculous! Weren’t you amused, Floyd?’

‘No, Miss Bell, I was not,’ looking at the young girl’s laughing face with indignant eyes. Should she go on? But Floyd did not wish to lose her situation, which might perhaps happen if she ventured to say any more, so she remained silent, though it was difficult enough to do so. For Miss Bell to be so hardened as to laugh at it! Poor Lady Roughton!

‘What do you think Floyd told me last night?’ laughingly said Jean the next morning to Sir Arthur, poising herself upon the slippery rocks, with her skirts gathered about her, as the remembrance suddenly flashed upon her. They had rambled out along the sands and on to the rocks in search of treasures for Lady Roughton—the latter’s excuse for sending Jean out—and neither perceived that they were getting too far from the small bay which would first be covered by the tide which had been for some time running in.

‘Floyd?’

‘Yes; only fancy, she told me that she heard some people on the pier last night call us lovers—you and me! Will not dear Lady Roughton be amused?’ Then, forgetting the words as soon as they were uttered—they meant nothing to her—

and hooking the end of her sunshade into some new treasure of seaweed, she lightly went on—‘Ah, I really must have you, dear! You are much too pretty to lie there. Foolish little thing to cling so tight. Wouldn’t you like to see another world before you die? Well, I know—lie still then, passing on her way, slipping every moment into the little pools, and lightly springing on again.

Sir Arthur lagged behind, apparently absorbed in some discovery of his own. In reality, trying to recover his self-possession, which had been terribly disturbed. ‘I must be more careful,’ he thought. ‘God forbid that any shadow of blame should fall upon her. I have, perhaps, attracted remark by being so constantly with her.’ He was thankful to perceive that the idea was only a momentary jest to her. None could know better than he how completely free she was from any undercurrent of sentiment towards him. She was more frank than any girl he had ever known, and it was impossible to misunderstand her. It would have been difficult to pay the most ordinary compliment to Jean had he wished to pay it. There had never been the slightest approach to anything which the world might not hear between them (in her wildest flights of fancy, Jean, as if intuitively, swerved from all that was false in sentiment), and yet he was painfully conscious that

if critical eyes had been watching them, they might have seen that he was not so undeserving the name that had been given them as was she.

‘What have you got there, Jean?’ he presently asked, trying to speak in his usual tone.

‘Oh, nothing, as usual! They look so lovely in the water; but when I fish them out all the beautiful colour is gone.’

‘That certainly does not look like a fine emerald.’

‘Oh, no; I’m not going to carry home a piece of a green glass bottle again. Did not my dear laugh—? Oh, Sir Arthur!’

‘What—what is it, Jean? Did you slip—have you hurt yourself?’ springing towards her, and seeing nothing but her white face and wildly dilated eyes.

‘Look!’ she whispered.

The water was more than a foot high at the point of the rock jutting out nearest them, and the small bay they would have to cross, lying further out than the one they were in, must be already covered. He took in the situation at a glance. They were caught by the tide in that small bay surrounded by steep perpendicular rocks which there was not the least possibility of climbing.

‘Can you run fast?’

‘Yes.’ They ran side by side, he now and again offering his hand to help her as she slipped upon the wet rocks. But she sprang lightly on again, and got as far as she could go with him. There was just the chance, he fancied, that they might round the point and be seen from the pier, or perhaps find footing enough to climb a little way up where the rock was more jagged. The waves were leaping some feet over the point, and covered the small bay beyond. They were caught and imprisoned in their dreadful trap; it was only a question of half an hour at most. They silently turned, walking mechanically back towards the centre of the bay where they could remain longest.

Jean was the first to break the silence. Holding out her sunshade she asked him to tie his handkerchief round it and stick it into the highest crevice he could reach in the rock. Without the slightest hope—he knew that pleasure boats rarely came that way, and that larger vessels would not be sufficiently inshore to notice them—he thrust the signal into a crevice as high above them as he could reach.

Then they were silent again, until, venturing to look into the still white face by his side, the words burst forth—

‘Thank God, you are brave !’

‘I do not know that it is bravery,’ with a shudder. ‘Twill be very hard to bear—aright !’

‘Hard !’ looking around with wild eyes. ‘To be beaten to death—crushed out of all identity against those frightful rocks !’

She glanced at the pitiless rocks and then at the advancing waves dancing gaily in the sunshine.

‘It would be no worse losing our identity here than anywhere else, if we *had* to lose it. But you do not believe *that*?’

‘You are speaking of the soul, about which they who think they know most, know nothing,’ he replied, moodily.

‘I know that part of me will not be crushed to death against those rocks.’

‘How do you know ?’

‘Because it can scale them.’

Sir Arthur Roughton was a brave man. He had been a soldier, and had once, when but a few years older than Jean, faced death with his men. But to die thus—like a rat in a hole—to stand helplessly there until the merciless waves beat out his life and hers against those rocks ! He looked again into the still white face by his side, and now its very stillness irritated him. In the first moment, he had been thankful to find her so quiet and self-possessed ; now he chafed at it.

Did she not yet realise the awfulness of the coming struggle, or was it religion? *What* was it? He gloomily watched the water creep round a piece of rock, a few yards in front of them, then exclaimed,

‘Cannot you cry, or—complain, or do something other women would do?’ It would have been some little relief to be able to *cheer* and sustain her, so long as it remained in his power.

‘I am crying,’ she murmured, unconscious that her eyes were tearless. ‘But it is no use complaining because we forgot about the tide.’

‘Well, I suppose I ought to be thankful that your feelings are not quite so acute as I imagined them to be,’ bitterly.

‘I am trying to pray; will you help me?’

He broke down. ‘Oh, Jean, Jean, if prayers of mine could help you! I *cannot* stand here to see it.’ Once more he strained his eyes over the heaving waters. No, there was no hope now. If a boat were in sight, it could not reach them in time. ‘I *must* speak! Jean, try to listen; try to imagine a man married to a woman for whom love is dead, and—and imagine the woman he did love in face of death. Would she——’

‘Do not go on.’ She thought he knew her story, and was too much stirred by the remembrance of the past to notice his agitation. ‘I

have imagined it, and I have said good-bye to him.'

'How? Oh, Jean, how?' he eagerly ejaculated, fastening his eyes hungrily upon her face. 'Did you give him one word of love—there could be nothing in it now—one word to help him?'

'I have been praying that his wife's love may help him,' she replied, absently.

'You do not know what love is!' he wildly exclaimed. 'Ah, God forgive me, I meant self-love!'

She shuddered, and drew a little nearer to him, placing her hands in his. He found that the water was touching his feet, and his hands closed over hers with a tighter grip. Death should not divide them. But it was not the first chill contact with the water which had caused her involuntary movement. The demon of doubt was trying to get possession of her soul. Dim with troubled thought, her eyes wandered fearfully over the advancing waves, and she murmured something which he interpreted to mean terror—a sudden awakening to the awfulness of the approaching death. In his misery, he almost welcomed this first symptom of weakness. It seemed to bring him nearer to her. But the few words of comfort he faltered out were received with a faint smile.

‘I am not afraid of the pain—not that part of dying.’

He watched her silently as she wrestled and overcame. The mists of doubt gradually cleared from her mind, and a new light, stedfast and clear, arose in the brown eyes.

Sir Arthur Roughton stared blankly at her. In the sudden recognition of what it was that would divide them, he hoarsely ejaculated, ‘Separated to all eternity!’

‘No, no, no!’ Unconscious that anyone’s life was materially worse than her own, she laid her hand upon his arm, and continued, ‘Neither height nor depth nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of—’

‘*Us!* Ah! Shut your eyes!’

She closed them, and folded her hands in prayer, believing that the moment had come, and he meant to spare her the sight of a wave advancing to engulf her. But his eyes were turned towards the jutting point. A boat was in sight labouring round on its way towards them, and, measuring the distance with his eye, he was afraid to tantalize her with hope. But, after a moment or two, he ventured to say, ‘Look up now, Jean.’

Her eyes followed the direction of his, and then he was the stronger of the two. It needed

not only his cheering words, but all his physical strength, to sustain her and prevent her being washed from his hold, as wave after wave arose. Once she was dragged from him, but he fought desperately for her, and had her in his arms again. The crew advancing to the rescue saw that not a moment must be lost, and worked with a will, sending the boat bounding over the waves at every stroke of the oars. As soon as they got within a barely safe distance, two of the crew swam and waded to the exhausted man's assistance. They scarcely knew whether Jean was still living as they lifted her into the boat; but they contrived to make her swallow a few drops of brandy, and then bent to their work again. There was no time to be lost with that death-like face in the boat. Exhausted as he was, Sir Arthur held her in his arms, urging the willing men on with promises of large reward. The rumour that some one had been caught by the tide (they had been seen from the cliffs, and a boat despatched to their aid as quickly as possible) had rapidly spread, and groups of people were gathered on the pier and about the sands to watch them brought in. Sir Arthur was a great deal too anxious upon Jean's account to notice the curious gazers, or, if he had done so, to pay the slightest heed to appearances. He would allow none to

relieve him of his precious burden, carrying Jean in his arms the short distance to the house, excitement and the brandy they had given him lending him the temporary strength. They were met half-way to the house by Lady Roughton, and none present could help noticing that her anxiety, after the first word or two to her husband, seemed all for Jean. The latter was carried to her room, and very soon restored under the care of the medical man in attendance. In truth, she was suffering more from the mental shock she had received than anything else.

‘How can I ever be grateful enough?’ she murmured, kissing the hand of Lady Roughton, down whose cheeks were streaming tears of joy. ‘Dear, what makes you care for me so much?’

‘Care for you! Thank God, you are given back to my prayers! Jean, oh, my child! my child!’

‘Your ladyship will certainly have one of your bad attacks if you stand so long, and—and excite yourself in this way!’ said Floyd, with an angry toss of her head.

‘Oh, no, Floyd. Joy can do me no harm—not such joy as this. Besides, I have been so much better lately, you know.’

The following morning Jean pleaded not being equal to her usual walking, and remained with

Lady Roughton. They walked the few yards across from the house to one of the seats on the parade, intending to spend an hour or two there, but, finding the heat and glare rather oppressive, they returned to the house again, and went to sit in the balcony leading from the drawing-room, which was cool and shaded. Each was glad to rest after the exertion ; Jean had insisted upon the other taking her arm as usual, but was herself feeling more exhausted than she would have liked to acknowledge. They were sitting silent : Jean on a footstool by her friend's chair, nestling her cheek against the latter's lap, as her eyes dwelt dreamily on the waves that had so lately threatened to engulf her. They could not be seen from within, and were a little startled by presently hearing voices close to them. Floyd and one of the servants of the house had entered the drawing-room, in conversation.

‘I say that she ought to be told !’ said the housemaid.

‘That is easier said than done,’ replied Floyd.

‘Well, it’s right down shameful to see the way they go on, that it is ! A making love openly before everybody’s eyes. Why the boatman who brought up her shawl wouldn’t believe me when I said that he was a married man. “Who’s the young lady then,” he said, giving *such* a whistle !

“Oh, she’s her ladyship’s companion,” I said. “*Get along!*” he said. “Her ladyship’s companion, indeed! more likely his’n. Why, we all said they was lovers the minute we set eyes on ‘em.” And then Mr. Impudence said he only wished his wife would keep such a companion for him !’

Jean had started to her feet, a deep crimson flush dyeing her face to the very roots of her hair. Had she found the key to two or three of Sir Arthur’s speeches, which had so puzzled her at the time they were spoken? Then the remark she had made a jest of about their being lovers. Was it possible he could be so wicked — Lady Roughton’s husband — to dare to have such thoughts? Ah, the shame of it! For a moment she dared not glance towards the insulted wife. She felt the hand she held grow cold and deathlike. ‘It is because they can say such a thing,’ thought Jean; ‘not because she believes it. Oh, surely, surely not; she must know *me* !’

‘He’s been making up to her for ever so long,’ returned Floyd. ‘Every one of us in the house has seen it. He worships the very ground she treads on, and when her ladyship’s taken it won’t be many weeks before Miss Bell’s made Lady Roughton, you may be sure !’

‘Ah, cruel !’ murmured Jean, turning her eyes upon her companion. She uttered a cry of

dismay. A stony horror had settled in Lady Roughton's face, and her eyes were fixed and glassy. Wounded to the soul, that Lady Roughton could for one instant doubt her was a heavier blow than Jean had ever yet had to bear ; the girl withdrew her hand and shrank back. Should she try to exculpate herself ? Ah, no ; could any explanation alter the fact that she had been doubted, and by the friend who ought to have known her best. She stood a moment looking at the white rigid face and the eyes staring so strangely at her—pride, misery, astonishment and indignation battling for the mastery in her own ; then fell at the other's feet. ' Is it possible you can think me so wicked ? Oh, Lady Roughton, to be doubted by you is worse a thousand times than anything I've yet had to bear. It is so horrible because I love you ! I do love you, dearly ; more dearly than anyone I have ever known, and I feel that I would give all the world for you to believe in me. Do you think I would kneel here when my heart feels bursting with pride, and tempers, and—oh, one little word —dear Lady Roughton, one little look to say you don't believe me to be so treacherous and vile ? '

But no word nor look came. There was the same rigid expression in Lady Roughton's white

face. Slowly Jean rose to her feet, and she added, in a low, broken voice—

‘All the same ; I shall know that I have never wronged you, and I shall never forget your goodness to me. I shall love you as long as I live, and no one will ever be the same to me as you have been.’

Then, with a last fond lingering look, Jean dragged herself away. Her first thought still for Lady Roughton, she rang the bell to summon assistance ; the first sound of her voice having caused the servants to hurry away as fast as they could go.

Floyd came in, looking half sullen, half defiant. If it came to the worst, she would have the sympathy of all honest people, at any rate !

‘Lady Roughton heard what you were talking about just now, Floyd, and she is ill.’

‘I am sorry she heard it so plain, Miss Bell,’ defiantly replied Floyd ; for she was quick to perceive that if the news had made her mistress ill, it was proof that she had had no previous suspicion of it, and it had come upon her like a shock.

‘But it was quite time that she should have some warning of what was going on. It has been quite shameful, that it has ! No respectable girl that loved her mistress as I do, could stand quietly by and see her wronged.’

Jean looked at the girl with calm eyes : Floyd's suspicions mattered nothing ; no one's suspicions mattered now. Besides, if the girl really believed her capable of being what she was accused of, she was right in so speaking.

'I do not blame you, Floyd, if you thought I was so wicked ; it was right to be angry, and I am glad you love your mistress—she needs love so much. Oh, Floyd, be good to her. If you are shocked, what must it be to *her* to believe such a terrible thing ! she loved me, you know.'

Jean passed the dumb-founded girl, went down stairs and out of the house—the few steps to the cab-stand—where she engaged a fly to take her to the railway station. Then she returned to the house again, went up to her room and hastily packed together her small belongings, taking none of the many gifts that had been lavished upon her, except the locket containing Lady Roughton's miniature. Slipping on her old black dress and bonnet and cloak, she ran down stairs again, and got the man to fetch down her trunk. All the available assistance in the house was called to Lady Roughton ; Sir Arthur had gone for a sail, and, without one word of farewell, unnoticed and uncared-for, Jean went her way.

CHAPTER XL.

‘THE DARKNESS DEEPENS.’

JEAN found a train just starting, and took a ticket for the London terminus. ‘Mrs. Brice will take me back again,’ she thought. She leaned back in the carriage and tried to realise her position. But her temples were throbbing painfully, and she was alternately burning with fever or shivering with cold. She found more and more difficulty in collecting her thoughts, which would stray after any trifle that attracted her eyes. She sat gazing in a numb far-off sort of way at the country she was speeding through, incapable of realising anything very vividly. ‘Am I going to be ill?’ she wondered. ‘What makes me like this? Why can’t I cry, or something, and why does everything whirl about so? Oh, dear, how sorry I am for myself.’ It cost her a great effort to claim her luggage when she arrived at the terminus, and then there was the difficulty of taking a cab. Some way she managed to make the cabman

understand the directions she gave him, though he once or twice reminded her that Chelsea was not in Broadstairs. Then she was dimly conscious of being whirled through the noisy streets towards Chelsea. But what made Mrs. Brice burst into tears at sight of her, when the cabman beckoned her to the door, and why did they make such a fuss lifting her about? And why would not they let her lie and sleep somewhere—on a chair—anywhere, until she was just a little rested? If they would only let her alone a few minutes, until she had rested, she pleaded. But, no; first she was lifted from the cab to the little shop, then on to the parlour, and up to the tiny bedroom, before they would let her rest, and even there half-a-dozen strange women must needs crowd in to help undress her before they would leave her. When at last they left her quiet, there was the sea driving her almost wild with its cruel threatening waves, advancing nearer and nearer. Why the sea should be there puzzled her a little at first, but she very soon had greater problems than even that to solve in some of the incongruous pictures presented to her.

‘What I want to know is who’s to pay for it all?’ said Thomas Brice to his wife. If she ain’t got no money to talk of about her, we must speak to Dr. Howard and get her took off to one of the

horsepitals. ‘Taint likely as I am going to keep her. Them as she was with was pretty sharp to pack her off like that when she was going to be ill ! We must look over her trunk, missis, and see if we can’t find——’

‘She put her purse into my hand to pay the cabman with, Thomas,’ hesitatingly began Mrs. Brice.

‘And how much is there in it?’

‘Two pounds, six shillings ; but——’

‘Hand it over for me to take care on for her. There’ll be rent and trouble and—all sorts of things—two pound six won’t go far. Give it here, I tell you.’

Mrs. Brice reluctantly put the purse into her lord and master’s hand.

‘Think what a friend miss has been to us, Thomas. Five pounds at one time, you know, and many a pound since.’

‘That come from the lady she lived with.’

‘But miss must have put in a good word for us, you know.’

‘That’s all very well ; but how are we to know it mightn’t have been more ? And if the lady’s got so much to spare, why can’t she help us a bit now when we’ve got the girl to keep and pay the doctor for, and all that ? Where did miss say she lived ?’

‘I don’t remember quite exact,’ said Mrs. Brice, slightly prevaricating.

‘It was in some square, wasn’t it?’

‘The last time miss came to see me they were going into the country, and the cab brought her from the railway station.’

‘Well, I’ll take good care they shan’t make me work to keep her when she’s got rich friends belonging to her!’

Jean lay tossing in her tiny bed, talking wildly of cruel waves, and intreating forgiveness before she was engulfed in them. ‘Indeed—indeed she had not tried to win his love from his wife! Would *nobody* believe her? Could not people tell when the truth was spoken?’

The medical man whom Mrs. Brice had called in stood listening gravely to the girl’s ravings, and put some short stern questions about her antecedents. But his face cleared a little as he heard what Mrs. Brice had to tell—he did not want to believe the worst.

‘Is she very ill, sir?’

‘Yes, very—dangerously. She will need a good constitution to pull her through. And if you know anything about her friends, you had better communicate with them. Have you no clue by which to get at them?’

‘I am afraid there is none to care much about

her, sir. She told me that she was quite alone in the world.’

Meanwhile, Jean lay unconscious of her miserable position.

‘What is that she is continually turning about in her hands?’ one morning asked the doctor.

‘It’s a sort of locket she wears round her neck, sir; and it seemed to comfort her so much to hold it, that I had not the heart to take it away from her.’

‘Let me see it.’ His face darkened as he noted the diamond monogram on the outside. ‘The old story,’ he murmured, as he contrived to draw it from her hand a moment. He pressed the spring, and it opened, disclosing the portrait of a beautiful woman. Really glad to find himself mistaken, though circumstances had made him a little hard, he was a good man, and had taken a kindly interest in Jean, he put the locket into her hand again, and advised Mrs. Brice to let it remain round her neck. Then remembering that the little he had seen of Thomas Brice had not impressed him so favourably as did the wife, he added, carelessly, ‘The thing is a mere gew-gaw, but as she fancies it, better humour her by letting her keep it.’

As days passed on, Thomas Brice was getting less and less inclined to listen to his wife’s assurances that he would not lose anything by letting

Jean remain. How was he to know that? He was a poor man, and had six mouths to feed already ; how was it to be expected that he could keep a stranger? Reluctantly his wife gave him Jean's watch and chain to pawn ; then a little gold brooch, and one or two other trinkets of small value, which she found in the little trunk. But she said not a word about the locket round the girl's neck ; comforting herself with the reflection that the doctor had said it was of no value.

Meantime, many an idle reader of the daily papers was wondering who and what 'J. B.' could be, who appeared in such great request.

'To J. B.—M. R. entreats you to communicate with her. Your leaving B. was a terrible mistake. M. R. never for one moment misunderstood or doubted you. *No one* is blamed in any way, and you are earnestly entreated to come or write immediately to your anxious loving friends, A. and M. R.'

'If J. B. will return to D. House, she will find a loving welcome and a happy home. The Miss D.'s beg her to come back, and Martha longs to see her again.'

'To J. B.—Her loving aunt entreats her to return to F——e. M. P. will never enjoy a moment's happiness until she sees her dear J. B. again.'

Day after day these advertisements appeared

in the ‘Times’ and other papers; then came another:—

‘On the 3rd, Jean Bell, late of Fernside, Raystone, in her eighteenth year.’

A few hours after the publication of the last notice Lady Roughton was no more; the Miss Drakes and Martha were in deep affliction, and all the light had gone out of Nugent Orme’s life. Although none saw him during his misery, something of what he had endured could be guessed by the traces it left. Maude Poynder—she was Maude Poynder still, the notice of her marriage notwithstanding—knew that all hope for her was gone the first time she saw him after the announcement of Jean’s death. She looked at his grave set face and fast whitening hair, and knew the truth had he not told her. But he did tell her. With the deepest pity for the woman who had given him her love and her youth, he yet had the courage to tell her the truth. Jean’s death had shown him that they could not be divided: he belonged to her and she to him, even more in death than in life. He was nearer to her now than he had ever been, and dared not put on the semblance of loving another woman. In a few humbly-spoken sorrowful words, he let Maude see into his heart. He showed her more than he knew he did; for, in

letting her perceive something of his love for Jean, he unconsciously showed that he had never loved before. The bitter pride, and shame, and anger with which she listened! Only she herself knew what she had waded through to reach the goal of her desires, and only she could know her self-abasement to find that she had soiled her soul in vain. She had always managed to preserve some sort of respect for herself. She had never loved doing evil: she had never done it for evil's sake, only in self-defence, against the cruel wrong that had been done her; and she had over and over again promised herself to make ample amends in the future, when once her end was gained. She had pleased herself with all sorts of schemes for doing good. Jean was to come back to live at Fernside immediately after she herself was mistress at the Grange—once the wife of Nugent Orme, she would be above the petty jealousies of ordinary women—in fine, everything was to be righted and all go smooth *after* she had gained her end. But she had not gained it, and the wrong she had done could never be righted now. Whether Maude Poynder would be a better or worse woman for the teachings of experience, did not as yet appear. Trouble was pressing on from other quarters.

Louis Poynder had been for some months

married to his first love Jessie, and Jessie was getting troublesome in more ways than one. He had taken a small house just out of Raystone, the opposite end of the town to Fernside ; and to begin with, Jessie did not approve of small houses. She wanted to be living in what she termed style, that her old acquaintances might recognise how much she was above them. Then she wanted to be in society. She had not married to be hidden out of sight like this, as though there was anything to be ashamed of ! Where was the use of having jewellery and lovely dresses and all that, when there was no one to show them to ? she asked. To adorn herself for her husband’s admiration, was, he soon found, considered to be quite a work of supererogation ; and Jessie in deshabille, without the edges of her eyelids darkened, eyebrows pencilled, or hair coloured, was but a faded specimen of humanity, compared with Jessie the brilliant (the fascinations of manner seemed to be put on with the other adornments of colouring) behind the pastrycook’s counter. When she was, as she termed it, ‘dressed,’ her husband still occasionally admired her ; but there were intervals, getting more and more frequent, when he thought she was but mortal, and, what was worse, told her so. Then she could not be made to understand that there was any necessity

to remain in the background with his relations. She was his lawful wife, and why couldn't she be more intimate with his mother and sister? She would have him to know that she was quite as good as them, and meant to let them see she considered herself to be so. It wasn't as if he had married an ignorant servant of all work; no, indeed! She'd have them to know that she could play on the piano, and had learned French for three months. Why could not she have a carriage to drive about in and keep waiting before the shops. Everybody said the Poynders were very rich, and she did not see why she should not enjoy some of the advantages of being rich. Why could not Louis let her leave cards at all the great houses, when she had had that beautiful case made on purpose. Above all, why did not his sister fraternise more with her? The disagreeable thing never so much as returned her a kiss, and when she went to Fernside to call never asked her to stay to dinner, though she could not say that she was not dressed enough. She had not a cheap thing about her, and wore all her bracelets and things. 'Then, to refuse to come to dinner with us, and only call. If you'd any spirit, you'd not put up with that from your own mother and sister.'

'I can't make them take to you if they

won’t. I told you not to go to Fernside dressed to death as you were. Ladies do not walk about like that in the morning.’

‘ You didn’t use to complain about my dress. You always said you admired a little dash.’

‘ I suppose I did behind a counter ; but it is not quite so becoming in private life.’

‘ What did you marry me for ? ’ sobbed Jessie. ‘ Because—’ Louis Poynder had begun of late to tell himself, ‘ because he was a fool ; ’ but he had not as yet been quite so frank with his wife. ‘ There, dry your eyes, or that black stuff will be running down your cheeks. What’s the good of squabbling ? ’

‘ I don’t want to squabble ; but I’m not going to be kept down like this much longer. I’ll show them all I’m as good as them.’

‘ I wish you could ! ’ bitterly.

Meantime, in anticipation of her time of triumph, she spent so much money, ordering any and every incongruous ornament and luxury that was shown her, that bills were rapidly accumulating. As marriage did not limit Louis Poynder’s own necessities, he was always making fresh demands upon his mother. But both he and his sister found Mrs. Poynder growing more and more difficult to manage respecting money matters. She, who in her season of comparative poverty

had been yielding to weakness, unable to refuse her children anything, could now only with the greatest difficulty be got to sign a small cheque. It was no use their reminding her that her income exceeded five thousand a year, that she did not spend half that, that the money was accumulating, &c. Nothing they could say seemed to have any other effect than to make her more depressed. Moreover, they knew that she was making unceasing efforts to find Jean. Watch her as they might, she was always sending advertisements to the papers entreating her dear J. B. to return to her.

Then, to Maude's dismay, she found out that her mother, who had always been a consistent Churchwoman, took to attending prayer meetings held in a back lane over some stables by a ranting cobbler of some exaggerated persuasion, and was what was termed exercised in spirit, with the rest of the saints forming the small congregation. Soon rumours were all over the town that not only had Mrs. Poynder been converted, but that she had accused herself before the astonished open-mouthed saints at a prayer meeting of having done something wrong about a will, and kept money that was not her own.

The news spread like wildfire, and then came the hardest trial in Maude Poynder's life. If she

could have hidden her mother away from the prying visitors who were constantly coming to Fernside, how gladly would she have done it. But she dared not ; she knew that worse would be inferred from her mother's absence than her presence, and dared not attempt to keep her back. Terrible as it was, she was obliged to endure it as best she might. Neither entreaties nor threats were of the slightest avail with her mother now. Maude could only talk as much as possible herself, to draw the attention of the visitors from her mother. But there remained the stubborn fact of Mrs. Poynder in tears, wringing her hands, and uttering occasional ejaculations about her lost soul for the edification of her hearers. It was all very well for Maude to whisper little asides about poor dear mamma being weak, and having unfortunately got into bad hands, getting old before her time, growing almost childish, &c. One and all agreed that there could not be an effect without some cause. It was clear that poor Maria Poynder must know best, when she accused herself of being a miserable sinner ; none but a guilty person would go so far as that out—of church. And very soon people began to put two and two together, and talk about Jean's disappearance just as the Poynders came into their property.

Then came the announcement of Jean's death,

and Maude had read it to her mother, fancying that when she knew that there was no hope, she would become more calm and reconciled. But it had not the desired effect; Mrs. Poynder grew worse rather than better, and her daughter entirely lost her influence over her. The only person she cared to see was Miss Orme, and that lady's visits were terribly trying to her daughter. Of late, Maude had not hesitated to show her estimation of her old friend, and the little lady had been shocked and astonished beyond measure. That her dear Maude could be capable of saying such things to one she had always professed to love and admire, was quite a revelation to her. She was beginning to wonder whether it was possible that Jemima Orme had been deceived, and her dear Maude was not quite so perfect as she had always imagined her to be? But she did what she conceived it to be her duty to do all the same. It should never be said that she had kept away from Fernside in the season of trial. Moreover, she had the comfort of knowing that her visits were at any rate welcome to poor Maria Poynder, though the latter's revelations caused her to return to the Grange each time with a graver face.

‘My dear Nugent,’ she at length confided to her nephew, ‘I am afraid that there really is

some truth in the dreadful rumour that has got about. Poor Maria told me herself this afternoon that some wrong was done about the will.’

‘What will?’

‘Well, you know it was said—and she says so now herself—that her brother left a will, giving the whole or best part of the property to the poor girl who is dead, and that the will was suppressed. Very shocking—such a dreadful scandal about people like the Poynders! Moreover, Maria says that poor Jean (it had come to be poor Jean with Miss Orme now) was sent into the world penniless. Now, you know, it was always said that Jean ran away for the worst of reasons. Maude hinted to me that there was something disreputable about her flight—that she had gone away with someone, and had the audacity to tell them she chose that kind of life. But,’ magnanimously went on the little lady, ‘from what Maria tells me I firmly believe that was a mistake. Indeed, I fear Maude must have judged poor Jean a little too harshly, if she did not really force her to leave Fernside. My *dear boy!*’ she ejaculated nervously, as her nephew strode out of the room, overturning her work-table and two or three footstools by the way. Then in soliloquy, ‘Dear Nugent, how deeply he must have loved her! He seems almost beside himself at the bare mention of her name.’

CHAPTER XLI.

FIFTY POUNDS REWARD.

ONE other advertisement in the 'Times.'

'Fifty pounds reward.—Any person able to give information respecting Jean Bell, late of Fernside, Raystone, will confer a lasting benefit upon her loving sorrowing Aunt, Maria Poynder, of that place, and receive the above reward.'

'What will you do next?' ejaculated Maude, angrily throwing down the paper. 'To put your name and address, as though we had not been disgraced enough! Fifty pounds, too! We shall have all the adventurers in the kingdom about us.'

'Oh, Maude, what does it matter if we only hear of her? It would be worth a hundred times as much to know she had forgiven us at the last. She may have; she was always so good and kind, you know.'

Two days later, Nugent Orme called at Fernside. He had seen Mrs. Poynder's advertisement,

and called in the forlorn hope of hearing she had received some sort of news. Of late, he had felt that she was so to speak working with him. He had never ceased seeking Jean since she left Fernside ; having had agents employed in all directions, and had never succeeded in obtaining the smallest clue. He had no need to question Mrs. Poynder. She had but one subject to talk about now, and introduced it to everyone she saw.

‘This is only the second day since the advertisement appeared you know, Nugent,’ she eagerly began. ‘There may be some news to-day. Ah, if she has only forgiven us ! It would be some small comfort to know that at the last she forgave——’

‘Mamma has had some peculiar delusions lately, as I dare say you have heard,’ said Maude, with a white face. This was the first time her mother had taken Nugent Orme into her confidence, and she was overwhelmed with shame and confusion, though she tried to carry matters with a high hand. ‘And one of her unfortunate delusions is, that my uncle left a will in which he passed over his sister and left all his property to his illegitimate child.’

‘If we had only given it up at once !’ sobbed Mrs. Poynder. ‘Jean was always kind, and generous, and I’m sure she would not have allowed us

to want. But we sinned, and our sin has found us out !'

' You use such very strong language, mamma. Even Nugent could not, I think, see the necessity for my uncle's nearest relatives giving up property which directly descended to them.' He could only make an indefinite sort of bow, and she went on : ' Jean herself had the sense to acknowledge the justice of the money coming to you, mamma. You know she did.'

' Oh, Jean, Jean ! If you could come back ; but for one moment to say you forgive——'

The door softly opened, and Jean, thin, and white, and ghost-like, but with the old wistful yearning in the brown eyes, stood on the threshold. For the moment they stared at her as if she had indeed been called back from the other world by her aunt's wild entreaties, though they might have seen that her shabby black clothes were terribly real. A little afraid of what their silence might mean, she advanced slowly and timidly into the room.

' I saw the advertisement, Aunt Maria. *Dear* Aunt Maria, is it true—did it really come from you ? It said my loving aunt, and seemed as if you wished to see me again ?' she asked, in a low, faltering, voice, looking pleadingly from one to the other. They could not utter a word, and

she went on with ashen face and trembling lips: 'I—I am afraid it was only a dream. I have been ill, you know, and have had such terrible dreams till this came !'

Her aunt's arms were round her neck, and she was sobbing out her joy and thankfulness unmistakably enough, if rather incoherently. But Mrs. Poynder was unceremoniously put aside, and Jean found herself in Nugent Orme's arms. He absolutely laughed at her weak efforts to escape. In truth his senses were reeling. Strong as he was, this sudden transition from death to life was almost more than he could bear.

'Ah, the shame of it ! Let me go !'

'Let you go !' he ejaculated. 'Do you think I will ever let you go again ?' wildly kissing her brow, and cheeks, and lips. But he presently became aware that she was unconscious of his kisses, and then came the wild terror lest he had lost her again. But nothing they said could induce him to relinquish his hold of her. He laid her on the couch as they bade him, but kept one arm round her whilst bathing her brow and lips with the restoratives which were hastily brought, and it was no use trying to persuade him that they could do it better.

How terribly deathlike she looked ! How changed since they had seen her last ; so thin,

and hollow-eyed, and shrunken cheeked! In truth, she was but in the first stage of recovery from the low fever, which Dr. Howard told Mrs. Brice only her naturally good constitution had carried her through. Her greatest bar to recovery had been her carelessness about it. They could not get her to take interest in anything; in fact, she almost hoped to drift into the other life. In the event of her death, she had confided a scrap of paper to Mrs. Brice to be sent to her aunt. She knew that burial would not be refused her. It was at this crisis that she lighted upon her aunt's advertisement. Mrs. Brice had borrowed the 'Times' from the public-house in the street, with the hope that it might afford a little amusement to the invalid; it went to her heart to see the young girl so hopeless and careless about getting well again. Not to seem ungrateful to her kind friend, Jean glanced at the front page, and then her eyes had happened to fall upon her aunt's advertisement.

Terribly irate was Thomas Brice when he ascertained that if he had only caught sight of the advertisement in time, he might have secured that fifty pounds, to say nothing of the expenses incurred by Jean's illness, which he had already persuaded himself had been very great. Poor Mrs. Brice was quite alive to the fact that fifty

pounds was a very large sum, and all that it would have done for them in their present sore need. But she comforted herself with the reflection that they had no right to expect it, and that she could hardly have borne such good fortune as that all at once. Then, if her dear Miss Bell was going to be taken into favour by her friends again, what a blessing that would be. How much it would cheer her on at her work again to know that Jean was happy at last !

Jean was feverishly anxious to set forth at once, putting aside all objections, and with the nervous irritability of one in the first stages of convalescence, insisting that she was quite equal to the fatigue.

‘ It says my loving aunt—loving sorrowing aunt. So she must want to see me, you know ! ’ excitedly exclaimed the girl, taking up the paper again and again, to feast her eyes on the words.

‘ So it do, dearie ; and if you want to go, go you shall.’

And she set cheerfully to work, preparing Jean for the journey ; turning over all sorts of schemes in her mind for getting the necessary funds. She saw that the cost of the journey had not occurred to the young girl, and determined to spare her that anxiety if possible. After some difficulty she succeeded in borrowing the required

sum from the baker's wife, by promising to work it out, but not without having her weakness in doing so much for a stranger pointed out to her. She accompanied Jean in the cab to the railway-station, the latter being too weak to go alone, and placed her comfortably as she could in a second class carriage, auguring all sorts of good to come of the expedition.

'And you'll come home again, if you feels inclined, won't you dearie? Dr. Howard was telling me something about wanting a governess to teach his little girls, this morning, so there's something to look forward to if you comes back, isn't there?' she said, in case of Jean's hopes being disappointed. 'God bless you, dearie! I can't a-bear to say good-bye. You won't forget to take a sup of wine and a bit of biscuit now and then as you goes along, will you?'

The 'wine' was a gill of port which Mrs. Brice had purchased out of her farthings, and put into a phial. She stood nodding and smiling till the train moved off, then wiped her eyes, and turned her steps homeward again, the long walk seeming longer in her anxiety lest some catastrophe might have happened to her children during her absence.

The doctor, who was hastily summoned to Fernside, saw that Jean's was no mere fainting

fit, and looked very grave as he informed them that she must have had some serious illness from which she had scarcely recovered, and that this was more the effects of debility and exhaustion than anything else. She would require great care for some little time to come, though not medical care perhaps.

‘Bring your best port, and give her a little frequently for the present, and set your cook to work at once to make good beef-tea and anything else you can get her to take in the way of nourishment.’

As Jean recovered a little, she so unmistakably shrank from Nugent Orme’s arm, that Dr. Travers bade him withdraw it. ‘And, perhaps, you would be good enough to stand back a little—where she does not see you for the present, Mr. Orme.’ He added, in a little aside, ‘Invalids are privileged to be fanciful, you know, and we doctors are the only men able to be of any use at times like these. Now my dear, good, friend!’ he added to Mrs. Poynder, who had sunk sobbing on her knees by Jean’s side; ‘Really, you know——’

But Jean weakly put out her arms.

‘Dear Aunt Maria!’

‘Oh, my darling! my dear, cruelly-used child, how good of you, how merciful, to forgive——’

Dr. Travers shrugged his shoulders. They were bent upon having a scene, and must have their way, he supposed. Still, he could see that this kind of excitement was different to the other. So he stood aside a few moments. After they had expended a little of their superabundant energies, and thoroughly exhausted the girl again, he would be wanted, of course.

‘Forgive?’ murmured bewildered Jean. ‘Dear, kind Aunt Maria, what can I have to forgive?’

‘Ah, you don’t know; but you are generous and kind. If we had only been content to trust to your generosity in the beginning—if we had but shown you the will!’

‘Mamma, you do not know what you are talking about!’ sharply interrupted Maude, touching her mother’s shoulder. ‘No wonder she does not understand you.’

‘But I must tell her.’

‘Nonsense. Come with me, mamma. There is nothing to tell, and Dr. Travers has told you Jean wants rest and quiet.’

‘I must tell her! It is useless praying for forgiveness until restitution has been made. My darling, there was a will. Your father left——’

‘Hush, Aunt Maria!’ whispered Jean. ‘What does it matter? The money is rightly yours. Pray do not trouble about that.’

Maude breathed a little more freely. ‘I told you Jean would recognise the justice of the case, mamma. Poor mamma has got it into her head that there was a will in your favour, Jean, and——’

‘I found it!’ sobbed Mrs. Poynder. ‘I showed it to you, and you read it, Maude—you know you did! If you would only have let me give it to her, my soul would not have been——’

‘I can only say that if there was such a will it disappeared,’ said Maude. ‘If the piece of paper you showed me really was a will——’

‘It was—it was—and I have never had a moment’s peace since it disappeared! I never shall till she gets her rights!’

‘Dear Aunt Maria,’ hesitated Jean, ‘if it will make you happier to know it, I have the will in my own possession.’

‘You!’ they ejaculated, in the wildest amazement.

‘You know you promised to give me papa’s desk. The day before I left Fernside I went into your room to speak to you, and until you came amused myself by looking at the desk. It was open, you know, and I did not think there could be anything of any consequence in it; but in the little drawer I found the will. I did not guess that you had seen it, and when I found that papa

had left the money to me I determined you should never know, and took it away with me. I did not care about having the money, and I knew you had always believed it would be yours from the beginning ; it *is* yours. I took it away with me when I left Fernside, and did not destroy it because I liked to look at papa's signature and fancy it was his love-gift to me ; but I will destroy it now, of course.'

Maude's face was buried in her hands, her mother was utterly speechless, and Nugent Orme was kissing the hem of the faded and travel-stained dress, his lips trembling with a mighty emotion.

Jean strove to withdraw her dress from his hold, a faint colour tinging her cheeks as she turned her eyes, nervously and apologetically, towards Maude. Dr. Travers felt terribly *de trop*. He was quite keen-sighted enough to know that he would not be liked any the better by-and-bye for having been present at such a disclosure. With a little preparatory cough of warning, he turned from the window where he had stationed himself, and advanced towards the group with as unconscious and matter-of-fact an air as he could assume.

' Too much talking, and very rambling talk I dare say it is. A very little serves to excite you just now, young lady. Yes, I see,' touching Jean's

pulse ; ‘but what we want is quiet, and prosy beef and mutton for a time.’ Then he added, in a little aside : ‘I advise your getting her to bed as soon as possible, and keeping the house quiet, or we shall have a serious relapse.’

At which, each did his or her best to repress any sign of emotion, and, difficult as they found the task, contrived to calm down a little.

Giving a few simple directions, and promising to send a composing draught, Dr. Travers took leave, musing over the revelation that he had heard as he walked home. It was not the first time that an odd bit of family history had been unwittingly revealed to him in his professional career. But the Poynders ! Maude Poynder (he saw at once that the mother had only been her tool), the pattern woman of the county ! Well, it was pleasant to reflect that the other came up to his expectations. Dr. Travers liked to find himself right quite as much as do other people. ‘Orme seemed to have become quite awake to her value now, at any rate,’ he thought, with an agreeable remembrance of his own verdict and Nugent Orme’s surprise at it, some time before. ‘Just the girl to do an act of that kind, and never know she was doing an exceptional thing !’

Jean’s distress at seeing Nugent Orme kneeling by her side grew so evident that he stumbled

to his feet and stood out of sight again, though he did not remove his eyes from her. Uttering all sorts of incoherent ejaculations of thankfulness, Mrs. Poynder hurried away to see that Jean's old room was comfortably prepared for her reception. She lay with closed eyes a few moments, until Maude stooped down and put some wine to her lips.

‘How kind of you, dear Maude! You will not mind my staying with Aunt Maria now, will you?’ Then she added, in a low voice: ‘When I thought I was dying, I prayed for your happiness with him—not only with my lips. Do believe it.’

‘Don’t, I cannot bear it!’

‘You are not afraid of me now!’ ejaculated Jean, in a wounded voice. ‘Dear Maude, cannot you trust me now? Do you think I could be so wicked as to—’

‘Hush! You are thinking of the miserable lie about the marriage,’ returned Maude, in an agony of shame and compunction. It had been her stratagem to deprive Jean of all hope, and prevent her returning to Fernside; and she had inserted the notice of Jean’s death in the ‘Times’ to induce Nugent Orme and her mother to give up their efforts to find her.

Probably he saw a little into the woman’s soul at that moment, and knew that she was suffering

justly after all. She was reaping what she herself, and not what others, had sown.

‘Lie?’ murmured Jean, a faint colour fluttering into her cheeks again. ‘Then are you not?’

‘I shall never be Nugent Orme’s wife, and,—she added, bitterly—‘if it will do you any good to know it, I do not now wish to be.’ No, not now she had sunk so low in his eyes. It would have been torture to her proud spirit to be his wife now he saw her as she was. Did not she know from bitter experience how uncompromising (now she called it hard and merciless) he was? Had not she known his love for Jean, she told herself that she would never have consented to be his wife now. Poor Maude, she suffered terribly, and it was not yet given her to perceive the use of her suffering, or to realise the possibility of being a better woman for not having gained her ends.

Jean lay with closed eyes a few moments. When she opened them Maude had softly closed the door, and Nugent Orme was kneeling by her side. He dared not speak, but probably his eyes spoke for him, for she knew—after one little shy glance into them, she knew—leaned forward, put both her arms round his neck, and lifted up her mouth to be kissed. He fought hard against himself—he had been denied so long; but he

overcame, and pressed only one kiss upon the sweet lips.

‘My wife.’

‘The happiness of it! Oh, Nugent, how shall I bear it?’

He remembered Dr. Travers’s warning, and steadied himself, speaking as much like a sane man as he could.

‘I suppose I shall have to help you bear it—eh, Jean?’

‘Say Jean twice over?’ she asked, hungrily.

‘Jean! Jean!’

‘It is even better!’ she murmured. ‘There’s no sorrow in it now!’

He looked down at the delicate face lying on his breast, and the transparent fingers weakly twining in his own, and was almost glad when Mrs. Poynder re-entered the room, so afraid was he of losing his self-control under the weight of this sudden joy.

‘Everything is ready, my dear child. Will you come now? Lean upon me, dear; or perhaps there had better be two. I will ring for one of the maids.’

‘No,’ gravely said Nugent Orme, lifting the light burden in his arms, ‘she will never lean upon anyone but me again.’

CHAPTER XLII.

SUNSHINE.

WHEN Jean awoke—she had fallen into the sleep of exhaustion as soon as they laid her in bed—she found herself once more in her pretty room at Fernside, with tender, loving Aunt Maria bending over her, anxious to begin a course of petting. She did not refuse the restoratives they brought her, but they noticed that she appeared anxious and bewildered.

‘Was I very ill when I came, dear Aunt Maria?’ she at length enquired, with downcast eyes, plaiting the coverlid between her fingers.

‘Yes, dear child.’

‘And my head was bad, wasn’t it?’

‘You were weak after an illness, and had come out too soon, my love.’

‘Yes. It was a dream, then; of course, it must have been a dream!’ thought Jean, turning wearily away and covering her face with her thin hands. ‘A cruel dream!’

‘Jean dear,’ hesitated Mrs. Poynder, ‘Nugent was very anxious for me to give you this note when you are sufficiently rested to——’

‘No, now! Give it to me at once. I *cannot* wait, Aunt Maria!’

The latter looked a little doubtfully at the sudden flush that covered the young girl’s face, and seemed so like fever, but ventured to put the note into her eagerly outstretched hand.

Jean tore it open with trembling fingers.

‘My darling, think how hard this is for me, and get strong as fast as you can. I am afraid to say more now than that I am yours; but try to imagine all that is meant by my being yours.—NUGENT.’

He got a tiny note in return, written with trembling fingers in pencil.

‘Oh, Nugent dear, I am so thankful it is true! I was afraid it was only a dream. I love you—I love you—I love you!’

Then she eagerly took the nourishing things they brought her, and sank into happy slumber again, with her precious love-letter laid under her cheek.

They were afraid as yet to ask her any questions about the past, but her worn and frequently mended dress, and poor shabby shoes, told something of what she had passed through. They

knew, too, that she would never have parted with her father's watch and chain but from some dire need.

When Jean began to rally again, she began to think of her kind friend Mrs. Brice. 'How anxious she must be to know how I was received,' thought Jean. So, in reply to her lover's question, 'Is there *nothing* I can do? I am getting dreadfully envious of your kind nurses,' she gave him the address, and asked him to go to Chelsea for her, and explain to her dear Mrs. Brice how kindly she had been received at Fernside, and how happy she was. 'Dear, kind Mrs. Brice gave me shelter, and nursed me through my illness like a tender mother. She has been more kind and good to me than I could find words to tell you, and I love her dearly. She will show you my little trunk, and if you will look under the leather pad at the bottom of it you will find the will. Please, Nugent dear, give her my dear love, and some money. She shared everything she had with me, but we were very poor.'

How poor they had been he could hardly realise until he visited Mrs. Brice. He went immediately up to town, and drove to the address Jean had given him.

'Are you Mrs. Brice?' he asked, entering the

shop and doubtfully addressing the poor care-worn-looking woman, with an infant in her arms, who came out from a back room to see what he wanted.

‘Yes, sir,’ curtseying shyly.

‘I have come from Miss Bell.’

‘Miss Bell !’ she ejaculated delightedly. Then, noticing his grave looks—he had hardly expected to find such poverty as was evident here—she added, ‘Oh, sir, she isn’t worse ? They haven’t never been so cruel as to be unkind to my dearie when she was so ill? My heart has been a most broke about her.’

‘No ; she is steadily improving and very happy, though the excitement told on her a little at first.’

Mrs. Brice burst into tears of joy.

‘May I come in, Mrs. Brice ?’

‘You’re kindly welcome, I’m sure, sir,’ lifting the flap in the counter.

He followed her into the little room, trying not to show his sense of its desolation. This then had been his darling’s home ! After she had got over her first shyness in talking to her grand visitor, who seemed to have such an exaggerated notion about her kindness to her dear Miss Bell, she was very glad to talk to him about her.

‘What she went through, poor dear, nobody

can tell ! We as have never known anything better are used to it, you see, sir ; but for a young delicate thing like her to be a walking about after situations till the shoes was dropping off her feet, and a putting up with people's sharp ways ! She was so cheerful about it all, too, never saying a cross word, and so laughing about her ill-convenient appetite, poor dear, pinching herself more and more every day, and —'

‘ Hush ! ’ And to Mrs. Brice’s great surprise her visitor started to his feet, and abruptly walked out of the house. He walked about the streets, going he hardly knew whither ; but to Mrs. Brice’s great relief, he returned in about an hour calm and quiet again.

At his request, Mrs. Brice brought down Jean’s battered little trunk, smiling at the idea of its being too heavy for her. He looked curiously down at it as the good woman showed him its very few contents, apologetically explaining :—

‘ You see, sir, she never had much, and what few things she had that we could make any money of was pawned. When it come to a question of life and death and food got scarce, I pawned all I could.’

He lifted the leather pad at the bottom of the trunk, where Jean had told him to look, and found the will. He stood for a moment gazing down at

it in his hand. Whilst she had been half-starved and clothed there had lain her claim to five thousand a year!

‘I will take this with me, Mrs. Brice.’

‘Certainly, sir,’ returned unconscious Mrs. Brice, seeing nothing but some folded paper.

‘Will you be good enough to bring me pen and ink?’

A little wonderingly, she brought them to him, and watched him take a book from his pocket, fill up one of the leaves with writing, and tear it out. She had never before seen a cheque written, and had no idea of the value of the piece of paper which he put into her hands. She did not realise it until he had left her and she had spelled the words over and over again, and then taken counsel of the baker’s wife about it.

‘This is for your present need, Mrs. Brice’ (he would as readily have made it five hundred as twenty in his joy and gratitude, but restricted himself to the latter sum as enough to begin with, afterwards it would be Jean’s privilege to be her friend’s benefactor); ‘and when she is able to talk the matter over with you, something will be done to place you out of the reach of want for the future. Meantime, she sends her dear love to you.’

‘God bless her! She knows I love her, sir.’

‘Yes; you have given the best proof of that.’

Then, hushing her babe to her breast, Mrs. Brice timidly asked, 'May I make so bold as to ask if your name is Nugent, sir ?'

'Yes, my name is Nugent Orme.'

'Ah, then, I know she is going to be happy ! That name was always on her lips, when she was lying insensible, sir.'

He smilingly shook hands with Mrs. Brice, patted Sissy's and Susy's cheeks, and even found himself kissing baby.

Jean slowly regained her strength, and then came her happiness. Meantime, Nugent Orme had been in communication with the Miss Drakes and Sir Arthur Roughton. The latter visited the Grange before going to Fernside, and the two men had a long interview, but what transpired was not communicated to Jean. It was not necessary to tell her, and her mother had not desired she should be told ; but Nugent Orme knew all. Mary Raymond had left her husband and young daughter sixteen years before, and, although Sir Arthur Roughton had married her immediately they had the news of her husband's death, it was because he was more honourable than many men in the same position, and not because his love had endured till then. Theirs had not been the kind of love which endures. The locket containing the miniature likeness of Lady Roughton is still

Jean's most precious treasure, though she does not know her by any other name than friend.

But there was one subject about which Jean could not be made amenable to reason. Although her aunt begged her to act upon the will, she persistently refused. Why could not they take the money and have done with it? She did not want it, and wouldn't have it. But Maude was on her mother's side now. If there were not some better reason for wishing Jean to have her own springing up in Maude's heart, she knew that it would never do for them to take the property now that the truth was known.

‘ You can allow mamma what you please, you know, Jean. She would have no delicacy about accepting a small allowance from you as she was my uncle's sister, and he had certainly promised to provide for her, but you must act by the will now.’

‘ No ; I cannot, Maude. Nugent will not care about my having money, and it's no use ; I *will* not have it.’

‘ You do not realise the value of the fortune, Jean. I do not think that even now you have learned the value of money.’

‘ I know that the very smallest chop you can buy costs fourpence, and half an ounce of tea three halfpence, Maude,’ laughed Jean. She went

on more gravely, ‘ But it is not a question of the value ; I object to receive anything by the will.’

And they found she remained firm. But they knew it would not do to yield to so Quixotic an idea, and at length appealed to Nugent Orme. He listened to their persuasions, and Jean’s objections uttered so decidedly—almost angrily, then said quietly :—

‘ You have some reason you have not mentioned, Jean ? ’

‘ Yes, Nugent.’ Then, with downcast eyes and flushed cheeks, she burst out, ‘ The money cannot make up to me for the wrong done to my mother, and—I told Maude you did not want me to be rich, Nugent ? ’

‘ Do what you please about it, Jean.’

‘ May I ? just what I please ? ’

‘ Your reason for not accepting the property being what you consider to be an injustice done to your mother ? ’

‘ Yes.’

‘ Then do exactly as you wish.’

She ran straight up to her room, brought down the will, placed it upon the fire, and with her hand in his, watched her large inheritance shrivel to nothingness.

He took a small sealed packet from his pocket, and placed it in her hand.

‘For me—am I to open it, Nugent?’

‘It is your mother’s legacy to you, my darling—her only one.’

‘My mother’s!’ With eager fingers, Jean broke the seal. Two papers. The certificate of marriage between Mary Bell with Oliver Raymond at a London church, and the certificate of the baptism of their daughter Jean in India a year later.

‘Oh, Nugent, I am the same as other people!’

‘But I don’t know that you are quite the same as other people, Jean, even now;’ smiling to himself at the bare idea of anyone being like her.

‘Ah, you are thinking about my not being so clever, and things. But my dear mother was the same as other people’s mothers, you know, though I shall always be glad to remember that it made no difference to you, and—Nugent, how did you get this?’ the question suddenly arising in her own mind.

‘It was entrusted to me by one to whom your mother gave it before her death, Jean. But he did not wish his name to be known. Will you let me humour him?’

‘Of course, what does it matter. I am Jean Raymond now.’

‘I consented to your burning your father’s will so that your aunt and cousin might see you were in earnest; but they know that you are your

father's heir all the same.' After Mrs. Poynder and Maude had quitted the room he added: 'Had it not been so, I should not have quietly assented to so large an inheritance passing out of your hands; decidedly not unless I had been quite sure of its being as usefully employed as you will in time learn to employ it, my Jean.'

'But Nugent, dear, my aunt——?'

'You ought to make a good provision for your aunt and a fair one for your cousins after her death.'

'Half, do you think?'

'Five hundred a year during your aunt's life, and half that same sum divided between your cousins afterwards would be very generous.'

And so, as soon as the law business could be got through, it was settled.

Sir Arthur Roughton finds occasion to visit Fernside more frequently as time goes on, and Maude Poynder is beginning to think of abandoning an idea she had for a time entertained of joining a sisterhood. Moreover, she enters pleasantly into the gossip over the preparations for Jean's approaching marriage, and is a great reference as to the etiquette to be observed. Had the arrangements been left to the lovers, things would have been conducted in the most unorthodox manner. Indeed, they are rarely to

be found when a consultation has to be held, and are quite regardless of appearances, Nugent carrying off his bride elect (to the dismay of the army of milliners and dressmakers besieging Fernside) to the Grange, where they spend the long summer days, sometimes in the woods, sometimes in the library, in delightful anticipation of the life before them. He knows it will not lose its zest. More than ductile as she is in some respects, there will be delightful little discussions between them in which Jean will hold her own however he may pretend to differ from her. And as in reality each will be striving less to seem than to be right, their atmosphere will always be clear and healthy.

Meantime Mrs. Brice has not been forgotten. A pretty cottage has been neatly furnished for her (it is understood to be done specially for her) in the adjacent village. Johnny, who has been allowed to choose his own future path in life, is on his way to Australia ; and in time, when he is disillusioned respecting the fortunes to be found ready made, he may be induced to work for one. Sissy and Susy very much approve of their change of abode and happy country life, and are beginning to feel a great deal more respect for the mother to whom they are told they owe it all.

Nugent Orme has taken Thomas Brice's measure.

‘You believe you are capable of doing some great work for humanity. Very good, you are the man for the age, and you shall have every opportunity for the exercise of your talent. For one year, or, if necessary, longer, you shall give your whole time and energies to the work, with ample funds at your disposal. If I find that you can help to raise or in any way improve your own class, I promise that you shall never lack the means. You will find me quite as much interested in the question as you yourself can be. But it must be fully understood that if during that time you have made no progress towards proving your capacity for such work, it will be your duty to at once return to any other kind of work you may be competent to do without for the future rating yourself at higher value than the wages you earn.’

It may here be stated that Thomas Brice attended a great many meetings, made a great many speeches, and commenced writing a book. But somehow, as time went on, humanity did not appear to be much ‘raised’ by the work, and it might be that his free access to his patron’s library rather impeded his progress than otherwise. So many things he thought of turned out

to have been thought of before, and, what was worse, to have been replied to. After his probation Thomas Brice grumblingly returned to the carpenter's 'spear' again, and though he will never be a skilled workman he does more towards feeding the mouths at home than he had ever before done. Whether he would do as much if he could say work was scarce, and Nugent Orme had not an unpleasant habit of ascertaining precisely how much he earned and reminded him of the smallness of the amount, is doubtful. Most probably he would prefer going back to old times, when he was a hero in his own eyes without being called upon to prove it.

But Mrs. Brice is a happy woman in her neat comfortable new home. She knows that neither she nor hers will ever be allowed to be in poverty again, and she is never long without a visit from Jean.

It is the night previous to the wedding, and there is all the customary excitement of such occasions at Fernside. In spite of the pleadings of the two most concerned, their friends have determined that the wedding is to be a grand one. Martha, who considered it necessary herself to bring her dear old mistresses' presents to Fernside, and Mrs. Brice are to share the privilege of dressing the bride on the wedding

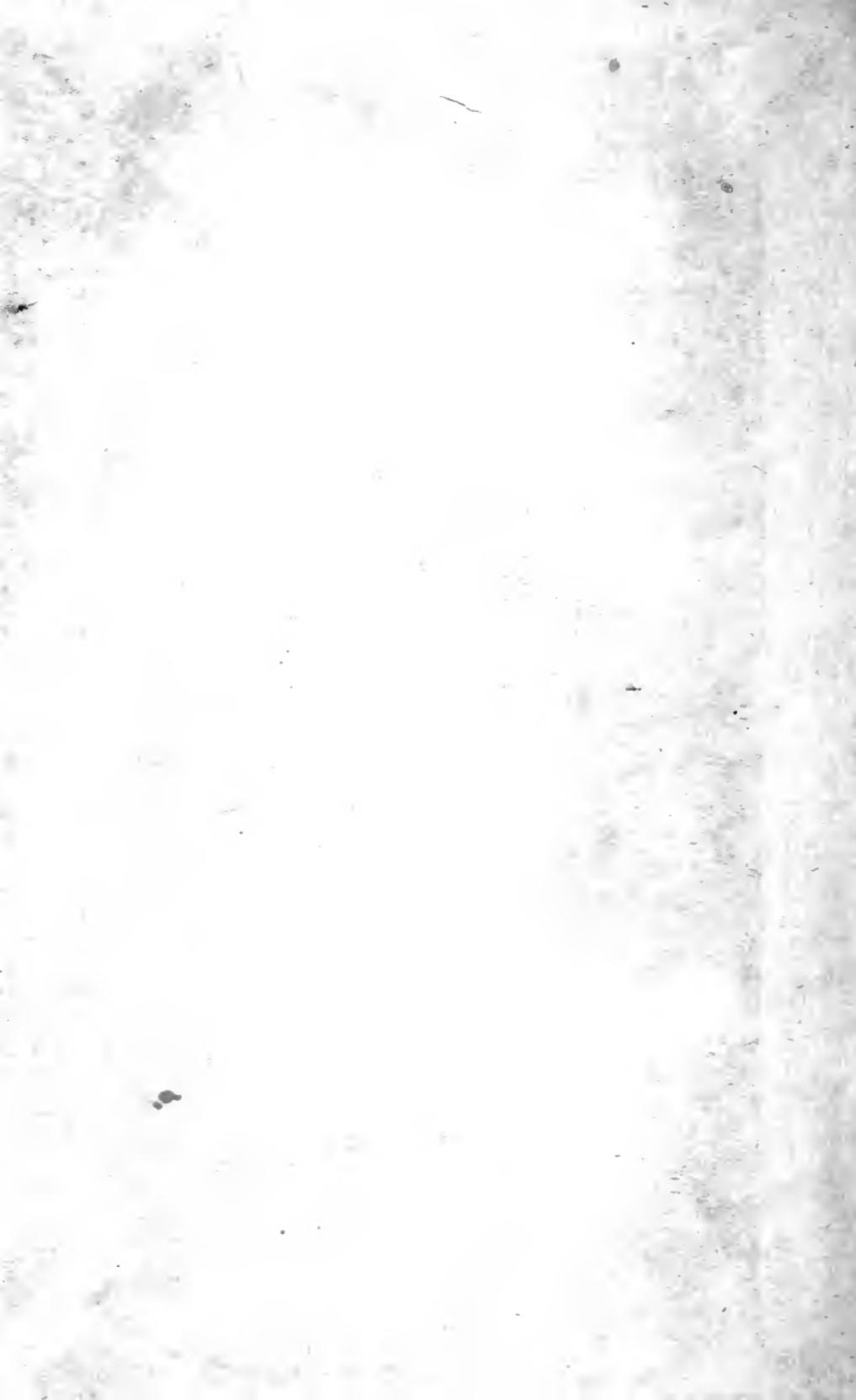
morning. Mrs. Poynder seems to have forgotten her soul in the excitement! Little Miss Orme nods and smiles approval of it all, under the impression that she has been of wonderful assistance in bringing it about. Sir Arthur Roughton has recovered his loss, and looks a younger and a brighter man. Even Maude looks approvingly on, smiling and blushing very becomingly when Annie Brayleigh whispers a question as to when another event is to come off. Although Maude's will never be the highest type of morality, she has learnt a severe lesson, and is all the better for learning it.

Nugent Orme has drawn Jean apart to make quite sure about the fit of the ring. She lays her cheek upon his breast, and lifts up the little gold circled finger to be kissed in Jean fashion.

THE END.









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